SALAD DAYS
Salad Days
JING SHUI BIAN WORKS
VOL.01
Via Lactea

Salad Days

□□Vol.01

JING SHUI BIAN / □□□

Copyright © 2021 by Jing Shui Bian

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems—except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews—without permission in writing from the author.

Original Chinese work © 2021 by Jing Shui Bian

Book Title: Salad Days□□

Author: Jing Shui Bian □□□

Translators: Alex; Yuka; Chichi

Editor: Michaela M

This book is a work of fiction. The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious or are used fictitiously. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: www.vialactea.ca

If you spot a typo/misspelling/mistake or any inconsistent naming in this ebook, please email the errors you've found to editor@vialactea.ca instead of the relevant chapter and screenshots of the aforementioned text.

Email:info@vialactea.ca

Published by Via Lactea Ltd

https://twitter.com/ViaLactea_press

SYNOPSIS

Salad Days:
A Shakespearean idiomatic expression meaning a youthful time, accompanied by the inexperience, enthusiasm, idealism, innocence, or indiscretion that one associates with a young person.

This is a story about a poor but gentle, honest ballet boy and a passionate, determined boxing boy. The two met at the Children's Center, and since then, they've grown up supporting each other—even in the face of hardships and challenges—as they resolutely pursue their dreams. The beauty of salad days lies in the sweat from struggles and the nurturing of friendships. Even though the two have completely different lives, what remains the same is their warm feelings for each other…

CONTENTS

Chapter 1 — The Childhood of Ballet

Chapter 2 — The First Meeting of Youth

Chapter 3 — Ballet Shoes

Chapter 4 — My Brother

Chapter 5 — A Young Girl’s Dream

Chapter 6 — The Path to Learning

Chapter 7 — Dreams Taking Flight

About the Author

Chapter 1 — The Childhood of Ballet

Jiang Shen was already past the age when most children start going to school. At the age of seven, he was still at home, helping his family with farm work. They lived in a village situated near a county, and together, the families living there managed a variety of farms, including fisheries. Like him, many of the village's children only started heading into the city to attend school around eight or nine years old. Before going to school, they were all like wild dogs, running around the place, unrestrained and playing to their hearts' content. Even with a preschool in the village, there was nothing that could contain them.

The Jiang family was unlike the other villagers. They actively responded to the nation's call, and only had Jiang Shen, their one son. The true reason, however, was that they were poor, and could only afford to raise one child.

As spring began, Jiang Shen's mother, Tan Lingling, started thinking about sending Jiang Shen to the city to study, but his father, Jiang Luoshan, was not enthusiastic about it.

"It'll be time to harvest the wheat after September." Jiang Luoshan placed a basin of water next to the bed for Tan Lingling to wash her feet. "Shen-*zi* can help out."

Tan Lingling was not very happy about this. "I'll already be thanking my lucky stars if he doesn't give us trouble. Just look at him; not even the dogs are as wild as him."

"Don't you have to deliver the vegetables to the city every week? He'll be of great help with that."

Tan Lingling did not respond. She removed her heat-reddened feet from the basin, drying them before getting into bed. Re-using the same water, Jiang Luoshan also soaked his feet for a while, only pouring out the water in the yard after it had cooled completely.

Jiang Luoshan walked past Jiang Shen's room on his way back. He glanced inside, discovering that the child was still reading comics.

Naturally, Jiang Shen noticed his father as well. Holding the book in his hands, he did not know whether he should hide it or not.

With an icy expression, Jiang Luoshan asked, "Still not going to sleep?"

Jiang Shen nodded hurriedly, carefully putting away the *Doraemon* comic book that he had spent a week's allowance renting. He replied obediently, "I'm going to sleep right now."

Jiang Luoshan harrumphed. "If your mother sees that, she's going to rip it up."

Jiang Shen dared not refute, pulling his blanket over himself, shutting his eyes, and pretending to sleep. He only poked his head out from his blanket after his father had headed back to his room. Pondering for a moment, he was still worried, so he hid the comic book under his pillow.

Tan Lingling woke up very early the next morning. She was busy even on the weekends, as she had to pick and deliver fresh vegetables to the city. Jiang Shen knew her schedule, so as soon as he heard the noise outside, he got out of bed

quickly, despite how sleepy he was. Entering his room, Tan Lingling saw her son pulling on a sweater with his eyes half-shut, looking as though he could fall back asleep at any moment.

"Don't wear that one." Tan Lingling picked out a thicker sweater. "The chill is even fiercer right at the start of spring. It's freezing out there."

"Oh, ok," Jiang Shen responded obediently, changing into the other sweater and heading outside to brush his teeth.

Tan Lingling was still heating up the water. Unable to wait, Jiang Shen made do with cold water. It was fine for brushing teeth, but the cold left him gasping when he washed his face. Shuddering, he finished washing up and went inside to wait for breakfast.

Tan Lingling said, resigned, "Why are you in such a hurry? Don't get frostbite right when spring's about to arrive."

Eating his porridge, Jiang Shen mumbled that he would not. Tan Lingling turned away to grab the small tin of Pechoin moisturizer she frequently used, smearing some across her son's face.

After tidying up, the two of them prepared to leave. Tan Lingling had picked a lot of vegetables, and Jiang Shen needed to help carry half the load. There was a bus that ran between the village and the city, each trip costing 3RMB a person. This was, of course, calculated into the price of the vegetables, so the trip would still be profitable. Tan Lingling instructed her son not to fall asleep in case he ended up squashing the bamboo shoots. Once they disembarked, she bought a handful of White Rabbit milk candy and tucked them into the pocket of Jiang Shen's cotton-padded jacket.

"Have some if you're bored later." Tan Lingling crossed the street. Further north was the city's biggest Children's Center, where children could engage in extracurricular activities. "Don't run around once you're there, got it?"

Curling his tongue around the candy, Jiang Shen smiled. "Got it."

The Children's Center was very busy during the weekends. Jiang Shen, who had grown up running around in mud and dirt, found everything novel and interesting. Somehow, Tan Lingling had managed to turn some of the teachers there into her regular customers. She ran up and down the building, delivering her produce, and Jiang Shen's head spun just looking at her.

The dance studio was located in the central building. While Tan Lingling carried the vegetables in, Jiang Shen waited outside.

He was quite tall, and without having to tiptoe, he could look inside through the window.

All around were little girls even younger than him, dancing to *Heroic Little Sisters of the Grasslands*. The two leads both had their hair in pigtails, and they were dressed in fitting, Chinese-styled gowns, one red and the other green. They each had a Mongolian headdress on their head, and their skirts swirled around them like blooming flowers. The dance teacher was clapping her hands, calling out the rhythm loudly, "1——2——3! That spin was wrong! Tilt your hips a little more!"

The one in red started spinning once the one in green was done, and the teacher was still not very satisfied. “Open your arms more! Put more strength into your legs! What kind of spin was that?!”

Jiang Shen was entranced, and did not even notice Tan Lingling exiting the studio. He sucked on the candy in his mouth so voraciously that it was audible to others.

Tan Lingling tapped his head. “What are you looking at?”

Jiang Shen was pulled out of his trance, a little embarrassed.

Tan Lingling glanced into the studio. “Look at how hard they’re working, taking dance classes at such a young age.”

Jiang Shen was a little befuddled. “Am I the one working hard or is it them?”

Tan Lingling froze for a moment, then burst into laughter, not caring at all for her son’s dignity. “Why don’t you try doing the splits? We’ll see who works harder.”

Jiang Shen did not understand that his mother was joking, and really went to the door. He poked his head in, peeking. The dance teacher knew Tan Lingling, and greeted her. “Ling-*jie*.”

Tan Lingling nudged Jiang Shen from behind. “Hello, Miss Lin. This is my son, he’s about to turn eight.”

Miss Lin smiled. “He looks pretty tall.”

Jiang Shen had never seen anyone so pretty before in his life. Her skin was very fair, her figure very good, and she looked just like a fairy in her leotard. Blushing, he wanted to hide behind his mother, only for her to pull him to the front. “Didn’t you want to try doing the splits?”

Jiang Shen stammered, “N-no, not anymore.”

Miss Lin did not mind. “You want to learn to dance? Let’s try out some stretches.”

Jiang Shen did not know what stretches were. Miss Lin pulled a chair over, sat down, and waved at Jiang Shen. “Come here.”

Baffled, Jiang Shen made his way over. Miss Lin made him stand with his back to her. From behind, she held onto the boy, holding his calf in one hand. “Keep your other leg straight, and stand firmly, okay?”

Jiang Shen nodded, and Miss Lin started lifting his leg. He was very obedient. Since Miss Lin had asked him to stand on his other leg firmly, he stood there, keeping his leg very straight. He only started to feel pain when his leg was almost at his shoulders. However, as a boy, he had always been taught that he should not cry, so he gritted his teeth, enduring it. He still did not make a sound, even when the tip of his toes reached above his head.

Miss Lin was a little astonished. She switched to Jiang Shen’s other leg and repeated the same action.

“Does it hurt?” Miss Lin could not help asking, after stretching both his legs.

Jiang Shen thought about it, and decided to answer honestly. “It does.”

Miss Lin chuckled. “Why didn’t you say so?”

Jiang Shen scratched his head. “It wasn’t actually that painful… I could bear it.”

Miss Lin studied him again, then held his hand and went to look for Tan Lingling. She was standing by the studio door, watching the whole thing. For once, she was not laughing at her son.

Jiang Shen did not know what Miss Lin was speaking to his mother about, still rather entranced by the little girls who were watching each other practice their spins. One of them even became unhappy when she noticed him watching, pursing her lips and hiding all the way inside.

Jiang Shen watched as they continued dancing, until Tan Lingling told him they were leaving.

On the way home, she bought him another handful of candies. She did not speak when getting onto the bus, and something seemed to be on her mind. Once the bus started moving, she took her account book out, calculating as her brows furrowed.

Jiang Shen dared not disturb her. His legs swayed along with the rhythm of the bus.

Tan Lingling glanced up at him, asking suddenly, “Do you want to learn to dance?”

“Ah?” Sucking on his candy, Jiang Shen had yet to register what she was saying.

Tan Lingling tapped her book with her pen. “You’ll be going to the dance studio every week, just like what you saw today.”

Jiang Shen asked cautiously, “Would I have to do leg stretches every week?”

Tan Lingling said coolly, “Once you start, you’ll have to do it every day.”

Biting into his candy, Jiang Shen could not help but suck loudly on it again.

He did not tell Tan Lingling if he wanted to attend the classes or not. The first thing he did when he got back home was run off, returning the *Doraemon* comic book he had rented. When the deposit was returned to him, he even counted it through carefully.

The boss of the rental bookstore was a little old man. He had an old-fashioned pipe in his mouth, and his reading glasses were very old as well. They hung off the bridge of his nose, looking as though they could fall at any moment.

“Do you want to rent another one?” This little bookstore was the only one in the village, and the old man was familiar with all the children who came by.

Jiang Shen tucked his money away carefully. “I won’t be renting any more in the future.”

The old man raised a brow. “Why? Your mother gave you a beating?”

Jiang Shen shook his head. “No, I’m going to start learning to dance.”

The old man choked on his smoke, revealing his yellowed teeth as he laughed. “You’re a boy, what are you learning dancing for?”

“Why not?”

“It’s for little girls.”

Jiang Shen was not very happy. The old man looked at him again, then suddenly said, “Hold on.”

Jiang Shen watched as he went back inside, looking for something. The old man rummaged loudly through his boxes and cupboards before stooping, then slowly shifting back around.

“Here.” He shoved a book into Jiang Shen’s hands. “A gift for you.”

It was an extremely old, worn book, its title page missing. Flipping through it, there weren't many words inside; it mostly contained pencil drawings of youths in various dance positions.

“You want to learn dancing?” The old man knocked his pipe on the table. “Go, have a look.”

With a pocket full of candy and money, Jiang Shen returned home to see his yard gate wide open. Tan Lingling and Jiang Luoshan were talking, and his father had a rather disapproving expression as he smoked.

Stretching his neck out and peeking at them, Jiang Shen dared not go in. He slipped away, running back to the fields.

The village was very busy in March and April. Jiang Shen’s next door neighbor, Goumao, had a hoe tucked into his waistband as he was digging through the soil with a shovel, planting seeds. Things were different now, and only children did nonsense like this; the adults just used seeding machines.

“Goumao!” Jiang Shen called out to him. “Where’s Qingling-*zi*?”

Goumao straightened up. Due to the cold weather, he was wrapped up like a ball, and even bending down took effort. “What’s that in your mouth?!”

Jiang Shen ran over. “Candy. You want one?”

Goumao opened his mouth. “Unwrap one for me.”

Jiang Shen did, and Goumao sucked on it happily. “You went to the city?”

Jiang Shen only ever had candy when he went to the city.

Jiang Shen nodded. “Where’s your younger sister?”

“She went to the city too, to learn to draw or something. I don’t get it. Isn’t it good to be as free as us? Why must she torture herself like this?”

Jiang Shen was too embarrassed to say that he wanted to learn to dance. He did not want Goumao to tell him that he was torturing himself.

“Want to go look for eggs?” Other than the busy farm work, the wild chickens and ducks were also laying their eggs during this period, and the rowdy children all liked to take this opportunity to make trouble. “I’ve invited Shubao and the others too. After this weekend, they’ll be heading back to the city for school. There aren't many days of fun left for them.”

“They’re much older, and they’re always bullying me.”

Goumao threw an arm over his shoulders. “This time, I’ll be around. What’s there to be afraid of? Let’s compete with them. If we win, Shubao’s new phone will be mine for this semester.”

★

Jiang Shen did not care much about the phone. Perhaps due to his young age, he was happy with just reading *Doraemon* comic books during his spare time. In the current era, children learned enough vocabulary in preschool, so even though he had never gone to school in the city, he was still able to read simple comic books like *Doraemon*.

As for phones, he had heard about how some children in the city were even more proficient with them than he was, despite being younger.

Goumao and the others were all three or four years older than him, and to them, a phone was a treasured possession. For the children in the village, many of their belongings were things to be shared. Shubao's family had money, so when his parents bought him a phone, Goumao and his friends were all very envious.

Egg hunting was a game the children had started playing from a very young age. As Jiang Shen was the youngest, he was designated as the referee. Wrapped up tightly in layers, he sat on a tree stump at the edge of the woods. In front of him were two bags, and he waited for both Shubao's and Goumao's teams to bring the eggs out.

With his eyes on the phone, Goumao gave it his all, even daring to steal eggs from right under the chickens. Despite being outside, Jiang Shen could still hear the sharp cries of chickens coming from within the woods. Very quickly, Goumao came sprinting over wildly, carrying a jacket bulging with eggs. Chasing after him was a gigantic, wild chicken, its tail a glorious riot of colors. With its wings spread out, its wingspan was as wide as a child was tall. Its screeches seemed to be imbued with thunder, and upon stretching its neck out, it leapt up, pecking at Goumao's head.

Goumao wanted to shield his head with his hands, but was afraid that the eggs would crack. He yelled as he ran for his life, but the chicken was very stubborn, refusing to let him go. Seeing Goumao running towards him, Jiang Shen also turned and ran. From behind, Goumao shouted, "Brat, what are you running for?!"

Jiang Shen yelled, "The chicken is coming here!"

Goumao gasped for air. "You're afraid of a fucking chicken?!"

"Why are *you* running, then?!"

Goumao was speechless.

In the end, Goumao persevered, unyielding despite the pressure, and did not return the eggs. Later, the chicken likely forgot about the eggs, only feeling rather proud of itself. Haughtily, it paraded in front of Jiang Shen and Goumao for over half an hour, and wherever Goumao went to look for eggs, it would follow, pecking his head periodically.

Poor Goumao did not have much hair to begin with, and now, half of it had been pecked off.

Jiang Shen had wanted to tell him that it wasn't worth it to become bald for a phone, but seeing how Goumao was giving it his all, he held his words back, not wanting

to rain on his parade.

When Shubao came out of the woods, the chicken also gave him a shock. He joked, “Look at how clingy it is. You should just raise it.”

Having won the phone, Goumao was currently in bliss. “Raise it? We might as well kill it and eat it. Shen-*zi*, what do you think?”

Jiang Shen responded, “My dad says we can’t eat any wild animals, as they’re all protected.”

Goumao clicked his tongue. “How annoying.”

He found a flexible willow branch, twisting it into a circle and tying it around the chicken’s neck. The chicken bowed its head, pecking at it a few times, but after seeing that it would not come off, it no longer cared. Striding forth, it followed behind Goumao.

“I’ll take it home and let Qingling-*zi* raise it.” Goumao was very pleased. He handed over the entire bag of eggs to Jiang Shen. “Let's go over to your place tonight to eat eggs.”

Of course Jiang Shen had no objections. Goumao said he was going to take the chicken home and have Qingling-*zi* raise it, but it was actually more of a free-range situation. Each household lived very close to each other; even their dogs were shared with each other, nevermind a chicken.

The rest of the group dispersed, leaving Goumao, Shubao, and Jiang Shen behind, along with a wild chicken with colorful plumage. The woods were a distance away from where they lived, so the three boys and chicken flagged down a tractor driving by and hitched a ride home.

The day was getting late, and the winds were strong. Thin, yellow dust swirled up from the dirt road, billowing through the air, and throughout the entire journey, it fell upon them like rain, neverending. Looking down at the thick sweater he had just changed into today, a sense of dread immediately crept up upon Jiang Shen as soon as he imagined Tan Lingling’s face. It seemed like the chicken was getting cold as well, no longer having the energy to screech. Jiang Shen hugged it in his arms, while Goumao and Shubao sat on either side of him. The three of them looked both comical and wretched.

When they reached the residential area, Jiang Luoshan was already out looking for them.

Carrying the chicken and covered in dust, Jiang Shen called out to his father apprehensively.

After seeing Goumao and Shubao who were also in the same condition, Jiang Luoshan looked up at the sky and sighed. He did not even have the energy to scold them.

Upon arriving home, the first thing they did was shower. Meanwhile, the chicken had it better than them. Jiang Shen’s family had raised poultry before, so they already had a feeding trough. Tan Lingling filled it with feed and made some small

repairs to the fence. Having its fill of food and water, the chicken nestled in the hay and took a nap.

After cleaning up, Jiang Shen came out to see that Shubao and Goumao had already changed as well. They were sitting in his living room, waiting for Jiang Luoshan to fry the eggs.

"You boys sure are mischievous," Tan Lingling started scolding them as soon as she entered the house after feeding the chicken. "Now that spring has come, you can't help but go around and stir up trouble, huh?"

Fortunately, Goumao still had a conscience. "It was Shubao and I who wanted to do it. Shen-*zi* only accompanied us."

Tan Lingling shot her son a glare.

Jiang Shen buried his face in his egg obediently.

Tan Lingling said, "Qingling-*zi* is back. She was waiting here for quite some time, and only just left."

As though showing off a treasure, Goumao took his newly acquired phone out. "I'll call her to come."

Next to him, Shubao's eyes were about to roll out of his head. "Can you be any more shameless??"

When Qingling-*zi* arrived, Jiang Shen and the rest had each received a fragrant fried egg. Young girls around seven or eight were a lot more sensible and mature than boys of the same age. Seeing how her brother was gobbling his egg down, there was an extreme look of judgement on her face.

Their family pampered and doted on this daughter of theirs much more than they did Goumao. With spring having just arrived, Qingling-*zi* was wearing a new dress and cotton-padded jacket. The little girl was carrying a drawing board, as she called out in a sweet, childish voice, "Shen-*zi*."

Jiang Shen lifted his head up from his egg. "Hey."

Qingling-*zi* squeezed over to his side, and Shubao had no choice but to pick up his plate and make space. When the little girl sat down, she did not forget to smooth out her new dress, and raise her chin very properly. "I finished a drawing today."

Jiang Shen wiped his mouth. "Let me see."

She had been waiting for him to ask, and carefully took out the drawing board she had hidden behind her back. Glancing at it, Goumao chewed on his egg as he said disdainfully, "It's not like it's a treasure or something. Just look at how anxious you are over it."

Qingling-*zi* had always butted heads with her brother. Although Goumao was not a bully like other children, and did not have the guts to throw away her paints or tear up her canvases, he was boorish — that's right, boorish.

She could not stand seeing him always climbing trees and digging dirt. There was never a day where he managed to keep his clothes clean, and his shoes only needed a week to look disgusting. He also did not care about his studies, always the last in his class, and whenever he recited from his textbooks, he had a heavy, rural village accent. In the past, when they were in preschool together, Qingling-*zi* always tried to avoid Goumao as much as possible. Having a brother like that was an embarrassment to her.

Among the children in the village, the only one that Qingling-*zi* approved of was Jiang Shen.

The girl treasured her sketchbook greatly, so Jiang Shen was always very careful picking it up and putting it back down. Qingling-*zi* said that the topic of today's drawing was 'Busy Spring'. Jiang Shen did not really understand how to appreciate art; when he said he would take a look, he really was only just looking at it.

Qingling-*zi* asked him, "Do you like it?"

Jiang Shen nodded. "It's beautiful."

Qingling-*zi* was delighted. Her brother leaned over, wanting to see as well, only to be rebuffed by a palm to his face.

Goumao was angry. "Your new paints were bought with my allowance last month!"

Qingling-*zi* punched him. "I secretly bought you a new pair when you tore your old shoes. You paid me back with those paints!"

Goumao grumbled, "You're so petty."

Qingling-*zi* put her drawing away. She stuck her tongue out at Goumao, then made her way out of the Jiang family's home at a leisurely pace.

Looking at Qingling-*zi*'s back, Shubao laughed. "That cheeky girl. Why do you dote on her so much?"

"Do I have a choice?" Goumao's mouth was still stuffed with egg, and his voice was loud. "In our family, she's the only baby girl, and gets to learn whatever she wants. Shen-*zi*, you don't even know how expensive those paints were. When I bought them, I felt like I needed to kill another five hundred chickens to earn that money back."

Things were fine before Goumao had mentioned any chickens, but once he did, the wild one in Jiang Shen's yard had woken up at some point, and started to screech vigorously in its coop.

"Oh hell, that scared me." Goumao pressed a hand against his chest, asking fearfully, "Does it recognize me now or something? Is it going to keep pecking me whenever it sees me?"

Shubao dissed him, "You're even stupider than the chicken. Just eat your egg."

Compared to the other families around them who were better off, the Jiang's had a first generation seeding machine. It was small and slow, and while other people's machines only needed to run through the fields once, Jiang Luoshan needed to

repeat the same area thrice with his.

Every year, during tilling and seeding, Jiang Shen would stand on the ridges between the fields, a hoe tied around his waist and a shovel in his hand. However, this was not for play; their machine was too old, and occasionally, there would be sections that had not been tilled properly, so Jiang Shen would need to fix those spots manually.

Running back and forth so frequently, the soles of Jiang Shen's shoes were quickly crusted with mud. Jiang Luoshan stopped the machine, waving him over.

"Are you tired?" Jiang Luoshan picked up his son and seated him on the enormous wheel, grabbing a brush and brushing off the mud from his shoes.

Jiang Shen beamed, grinning widely. "No, I'm not."

Jiang Luoshan smiled back. He was actually not that old, not even forty, but since he worked daily, bowing over the fields with his back towards the sun, the passage of time was etched into his face clearly.

"In September, you'll be going to school," Jiang Luoshan said suddenly, "through some connections, we've managed to get you into the third-year class."

Although Jiang Shen was young, he was not completely unaware of his family's financial situation. He did not speak, but fiddled with the hoe tied around his waist with a frown.

Jiang Luoshan asked him, "Your mom said that you wanted to learn to dance?"

Jiang Shen dared not say yes. After a bout of silence, he quietly whispered, "Mn."

Jiang Luoshan sighed. As a father, he understood his son's nature deeply. Jiang Shen's reply had been very soft, but in his ears, it was weighty.

"If you want to learn to dance, you can't read comic books anymore," Jiang Luoshan threatened jokingly, "you have to save all your allowance to pay for the lessons."

Once Jiang Luoshan brought that up, Jiang Shen remembered what he had done. Hurriedly, he took out the deposit he had received for returning that book and held it out to his father. After doing this, he seemed to have gained a tiny bit more confidence, saying earnestly, "I'm not reading comic books anymore. Not in the future, either."

Jiang Luoshan looked down at the coins and notes in his hand. He opened his mouth a few times, but the words were stuck in his throat, unable to be spoken out loud. Silently, he lifted Jiang Shen off of the wheel. With a little bit more force than usual, he ruffled his son's hair. "Go into the city tomorrow, and ask your mom to buy you a pair of shoes."

★

To Jiang Shen, going to the city twice a week was quite a big deal. Like always, Tan Lingling woke up early in the morning, pulled out the good clothes usually reserved for the New Year, and had Jiang Shen change into them. She put on a good quality,

cashmere coat as well, carefully applying makeup as she looked in the dressing mirror.

“Go brush your hair properly. Use a little bit of water,” Tan Lingling instructed Jiang Shen while applying lipstick. “Make sure you’re neat and tidy.”

Looking in the mirror, Jiang Shen fought with the cowlicks in his hair. After some time, he finally got it to lay flat obediently.

Tan Lingling came over with a scarf. “Wear that new pair of sneakers.”

“Okay.” Jiang Shen sat on a little stool, tying his shoelaces.

Tan Lingling crouched down. Her cashmere coat was too long, and with no other choice, she could only roll up the excess length, tucking it around her knees.

“Your feet are growing so fast,” she sighed, “you’re growing out of your clothes and shoes so quickly.”

“Can’t we just adjust them to be bigger?” Jiang Shen asked naively.

Tan Lingling did not know whether to laugh or cry. “Who still alters old clothes nowadays? We might not be rich, but we can’t embarrass ourselves like that.”

Jiang Shen could not make the connection between ‘wearing altered clothes’ and ‘being an embarrassment’. With the innocence and ignorance of his age, his mind did not overthink the matter, nor did he think badly of such things.

The wild chicken in their yard had woken up too. Tan Lingling did not close its gate, so it could come out to stroll and relieve itself whenever it wanted. Upon seeing Jiang Shen, it clucked a few times.

“Tony.” Goumao had wanted to be trendy and insisted on giving the chicken an English name, so Jiang Shen followed suit obediently. “We’re going out.”

Tony the chicken shook its head. Tan Lingling was already calling out to Jiang Shen from the yard, so he hurried towards her.

“Aren’t you silly?” she laughed. “Talking to a chicken.”

Tan Lingling often took the bus to the city, and the drivers all knew her. Seeing her today, the driver was pretty surprised. “You’re delivering vegetables again today?”

“No, I’m going to buy some things.” She nudged her son. “Go sit at the back.”

The driver closed the door. “It’s too early. Take a nap, I’ll call you once we’re there.”

Happily, Tan Lingling agreed. She sat down next to Jiang Shen, letting her son lean against her. “Sleepy?”

Jiang Shen was quite excited. “No. Why are we going to the city?”

Tan Lingling patted his head. “You’ll be starting school in September, so I’m taking you to see your new school.”

“Will I be with Goumao and the others?”

“Yes.” Tan Lingling held his hand. “However, Chen Maoxiu and the others are in middle school. You’ll be in the same class as Chen Qingling.”

Jiang Shen was quite happy. “Qingling-*zi* and I can go to school and come back home together then.”

Tan Lingling tapped his forehead. “You should call them by their actual names outside, especially Goumao. It sounds pretty awful calling him by that nickname at school.”

Jiang Shen always listened to his mother. Leaning against her shoulder, he sat there quietly for some time, then could not keep himself from pressing against the window and looking outside. As for Tan Lingling, an hour or so passed by quickly as she napped. Arriving at the station, the bus driver turned around to call for them, and only then did the two disembark.

Tan Lingling first went to the mall, coming out with two cartons of cigarettes. After wrapping them up carefully and tucking them into her shopping bag, she seemed to look a little more at ease.

The school Jiang Shen would be studying at wasn't considered one of the best, but its primary, middle, and high schools were affiliated, which was very convenient for students who wished to stay in the same school system. The Jiang family had chosen the school because of this, and its tuition was not expensive either. As such, they had sought help from the town mayor to enroll Jiang Shen into the school.

Despite the fact that Jiang Shen had already been accepted, Tan Lingling felt that she should personally go down and thank the school management. She had always been a very decisive person, and although she was frugal, she did not hesitate when it came to the societal expectations of returning favours and maintaining relationships.

“I’m going to the principal’s office.” Tan Lingling bent down, straightening the collar of Jiang Shen’s jacket. “Can you play by yourself?”

The school grounds were relatively safe, and Jiang Shen was not afraid of exploring the place. However, he was preoccupied with something else. “Are we not getting candy today?”

Tan Lingling put on an expression of feigned scorn. “Didn’t you have candy yesterday? We’ve told you before that you can only have candy once a week.”

Jiang Shen mumbled sadly, “Okay.”

Tan Lingling’s heart did not soften. She left Jiang Shen with a few reminders, then went to the office with the cigarettes.

Although the schools all shared the same campus, they each had their own names: Experimental Primary School and No. 6 Middle School. Jiang Shen dared not go over to the high school section, so he poked around the lower grade areas obediently.

There were no classes during the weekend, and the janitors and teachers paid him no attention. He randomly found a few classrooms, and like a puppy patrolling the area, he wandered through them all. Sitting down in the front row of a classroom, then going to the back row and lying down, he felt extremely happy.

In no time, Tan Lingling was done presenting her gifts. She spent a lot of time looking for her son in the huge campus, and in the end, she had to borrow the school’s broadcast system to find him.

“You can disappear even while playing in a school.” Tan Lingling had to laugh out of frustration. “Are you that happy?”

Jiang Shen smiled brightly. “I am.”

“Once you actually start school, I’ll see how happy you’ll be,” she said, raining on his parade.

When the mother and son pair left the school, it was still early. Tan Lingling brought Jiang Shen straight to the Children’s Center, and Miss Lin was already in the studio. “You guys are here!” she said delightedly while removing her down jacket.

Tan Lingling was a lot more courteous towards Miss Lin. “We’re here, we’re here. Miss Lin, you’re looking great today.”

Miss Lin started laughing, responding that Tan Lingling was much too polite, then waved at Jiang Shen to come to her. “Have you bought your shoes yet?” she asked.

Tan Lingling was a little embarrassed. “We haven’t had the time…”

Miss Lin did not say anything, going into the dressing room and bringing a pair of spare shoes out. “I have a pair for bigger girls here. Try them on?”

Jiang Shen removed his shoes hurriedly, preparing to put them on.

Miss Lin was holding a pair of ballet shoes. The size fit quite well, though he did not know how to tie the ribbons. He sat cross-legged on the ground for some time, trying so hard that he broke out in a sweat.

Miss Lin bent down. “Don’t worry, I’ll help you tie them.”

Boys' ankles were a lot thicker than girls'. The ribbons were a little too short, so she didn't wrap them around his ankles as many times as usual. Due to the cold weather, Jiang Shen was still wearing his long johns, and they, along with his trousers, were rolled up to his calves.

When he stood up, he appeared quite comical. To any onlooker, he looked just like a little duckling with bare legs. Standing by the door, Tan Lingling could not help but lower her head to hide her laughter.

Jiang Shen did not notice at all. His expression was very solemn, and he stood very straight in front of the mirror.

“We’ll do some warm ups first,” Miss Lin said, “bend backwards, stretch your waist, and reach for the ground. No need to force yourself, just do what you can.”

She bent backwards before the mirror, and Jiang Shen followed along. She then straightened back up, moved behind him, and reached out to guide his back. “Slowly. Reach backwards…”

Both his palms were flat on the ground. She was very satisfied. “Stand up.”

He stood back up.

“Repeat that a few times.” She supported his waist. “Do it slowly.”

Jiang Shen couldn't help but ask, “What are we doing?”

“This is a backbend.”

Jiang Shen was looking up, his hands extended beyond his head. He could feel his shirt sliding, exposing his tummy.

“Don’t relax.” Miss Lin used a little force. “Tilt your waist upwards.”

Holding his breath, he put all his might into it. At the same time, he also felt a little shy, his face flushing.

Seeing that, she laughed. “There’s no need to feel shy. Next time, just change into a leotard, and that won’t happen.”

Hesitant, he did not respond. After he was done with the backbend, Miss Lin continued instructing him on how to stretch his body and legs. In the end, while practicing the splits, not even Jiang Shen expected to be able to perform them so easily.

“Very good,” she praised him, “you must remember to practice at home every day, alright?”

He nodded. After standing up, he felt a little discomfort — his pants were too tight. He hadn't noticed when he was doing the splits, but now that he was upright, he realized the move made his pants stretch way too snugly around the crotch.

Watching her son covering his crotch as he changed into his shoes awkwardly with his other hand, Tan Lingling finally couldn't suppress her laughter.

Jiang Shen was left speechless by his mother’s reaction.

“That’s normal for boys. Just wear looser pants next time,” Miss Lin consoled him kindly.

Tan Lingling helped Jiang Shen take off his shoes. Right as she was about to return them, Miss Lin pushed them back towards her. “He can keep these. When you’re home, just swap out the ribbons, and he’ll be able to wear them for a while.”

Tan Lingling knew that she was being kind, so she accepted it. “Boys grow too fast at this age,” she said quietly, a little embarrassed, “we have to keep getting him new shoes…”

They had left early in the morning and returned late at night. When Tan Lingling woke Jiang Shen up, he rubbed his eyes blearily. He had been holding the ballet shoes tightly while he was sleeping, and now their soles looked a little out of shape.

Holding his hand, Tan Lingling asked, “Do your legs hurt?”

He yawned. “Nope.”

“We’re almost home, why are you still holding it in? If it hurts, just say so.”

Jiang Shen thought about it, then answered honestly, “Just a little…”

Chuckling, Tan Lingling laughed gently at her son.

Arriving at home, Jiang Luoshan had already finished cooking dinner. In the yard, Tony was strutting around in circles majestically, and when it saw Jiang Shen and Tan Lingling, it flapped its wings a few times forcefully.

Tan Lingling went inside to get the chicken feed. Glancing at the ballet shoes in his son's hand, Jiang Luoshan did not say anything.

The family sat down to have dinner. After, while they were clearing the table, Goumao came by to invite Jiang Shen to catch birds. Jiang Luoshan waved them away. "Go, go and play."

Jiang Shen left with Goumao.

After the dishes were washed, Tan Lingling took out some needle and thread from her room. Pulling out a stool, she sat by the entrance to the yard. Jiang Luoshan carried over a charcoal brazier and placed it by her feet.

The couple chatted idly. Poking at the charcoal, Jiang Luoshan asked, "Have the school fees been paid?"

"Yes." Holding the needle up, Tan Lingling scratched her head. She found a few ribbons, then removed the old ones from the ballet shoes, slowly sewing new ones onto them. "How much money do we have left?"

Jiang Luoshan watched her sew. "Don't worry about the money. I'll work a little harder every day, and we'll have a good harvest this September."

Tan Lingling sighed. She bowed her head, her fingers deft and quick as she sewed the ribbons, yet her voice was tense. "We could have bought a planting machine… Now, you'll be exhausted again come April and May. Can your waist handle it?"

"I'm a man. What can I not handle?"

She shot him a glare. "Your son is just like you. No matter how much you're suffering, or how tired or painful something is, you'll never bring it up."

Laughing, Jiang Luoshan did not respond. "How's our son's dancing?" he asked.

Tan Lingling chuckled. "Classes have yet to start. Today, he was just practicing something called a backbend, some other stretches, and the splits? Ah, I could feel the pain myself just looking at him."

She paused before continuing, "But Shen-*zi* likes it."

Jiang Luoshan's expression turned complicated. "Say, why would our son suddenly like dancing?" he slowly asked a moment later, "He's not a girl…"

Tan Lingling rolled her eyes. "What year are we in now? So what if he's not a girl? For all we know, in the future, we might just have a great dancer in our family."

Smiling, he listened as his wife fantasized. He poked at the charcoal, and bits of red sparks flew up into the air.

It seemed like they were warming up this cold, early spring night.

Chapter 2 — The First Meeting of Youth

Past the unseasonably cold April and May, followed by a few rainfalls, the temperature started rising faster than the sprouts and seedlings. Through the village was a main road made of asphalt, and lining both sides were the luxuriant greenery of trees and shrubs. Right after the winter break, Goumao's family bought him a scooter, and wanting to show it off, he would insist on driving over twenty kilometers home every weekend. Passing by the fields, he purposefully stopped to shout at Jiang Shen, who was busy planting shoots, "Shen-*zi*! *Gege* will drive you back!"

Jiang Shen looked up, wearing a lady's sunhat that was a little too big for him. His calves were buried in the mud as he waved at Goumao.

Goumao was unable to get down into the fields, so Jiang Shen could only wade over slowly. "I have to work, and my feet are dirty. Your scooter is new, isn't it?"

"Why didn't you guys ask to borrow our seeding machine? I'll go home and ask my dad!"

Jiang Shen pursed his lips. "What if your mom doesn't agree?"

Goumao fell silent. After a period of contemplation, he decided to park his scooter by the road, removing his shoes and rolling up his trousers. "Come, I'll help you with the planting."

Jiang Shen stopped him in a hurry. "Better not. If my dad sees you, I'll get scolded."

Having already taken off his shoes, Goumao didn't want to put them back on, so he sat down by the edge of the field, talking to Jiang Shen. "Are you going to the Children's Center later?"

Jiang Shen nodded. "I can go once I'm done with my chores."

Goumao frowned. "Why are you learning all sorts of nonsense too… Exactly what classes are you attending?"

Hemming and hawing, Jiang Shen refused to answer, and Goumao did not push him either. Swaying his bare legs, goosebumps appeared on his skin, likely from the chilly wind. He suddenly suggested, "Why don't you borrow a seeding machine from Shubao's family?"

In regards to the seeding machine, although Jiang Luoshan was a stubborn man who liked to tough things out, he did borrow from the other families a few times when he had back issues two years ago.

Goumao's mother, Miao Hua'er, was famous throughout the area for being a shrew. Back when she married Chen Laoshi, during the brazier kicking part of the ceremony, she nearly sent the whole thing flying. Normally, the women in the village had no recreational hobbies other than farming, so whenever they had nothing to do, they all liked to show their skills off on the card table. Both Miao Hua'er's cards and tongue were vicious while the card game was going on, but after teaming up with her enough times, the others had gotten used to it.

Tan Lingling would only join them occasionally. She had played with Miao Hua'er a few times, and they could be considered friends. The seeding machine they had borrowed two years ago was from the Chen family.

Their falling apart was rather complicated, and it was related to Shubao's mother, Li Zhuo.

Unlike the locals, Li Zhou was a total city woman. Although she had married into the village, she worked for a large enterprise in the city as their finance director, and it was rumored that she even owned some of the company's stocks. Even if Shubao's father did not have a good harvest for the year, Li Zhuo earned enough money alone to look after their entire family.

Li Zhuo was not close to any of the villagers, and she never participated in the card games of the women or tried bonding with them. Miao Hua'er had always disliked her, as she felt that people from the city were pretentious and looked down on others. During the card games, she would always prattle on about her.

Once during a game, Tan Lingling had heard her talk about Li Zhuo like that again, and couldn't help herself. "Shubao's mom isn't like that," she had rebutted, "don't say that anymore, Hua'er-*jie*."

Miao Hua'er had been too used to getting her way, and this was the first time someone had spoken against her, daring to refute her. She had immediately exploded, but of course Tan Lingling was not easily bullied either, so she no longer participated in the card games, even returning the seeding machine to the Chen family.

In truth, once Miao Hua'er had calmed down, she instantly regretted it. Despite her bad temper, she was still a reasonable person, and upon seeing that the seeding machine had been returned, she felt even worse. However, she was unable to put aside her pride, and throughout the New Year, she had been feeling conflicted over the incident. Seeing that it was now May again, and thinking about the circumstances of Tan Lingling's family and Jiang Luoshan's back, Miao Hua'er could no longer sit still.

She tidied up her place, and went over to visit the Jiang family after lunch. Entering the yard, she called out in an extremely sonorous voice, "Ling-*mei*!"

Tony the chicken crowed back, and was shooed away by her rudely.

Again, she called out 'Ling-*mei*' loudly, walking into the living room confidently. However, instead of Tan Lingling, she saw Li Zhuo sitting there calmly. As Li Zhuo sipped her tea, she smiled at Miao Hua'er politely. Miao Hua'er's nature was truly formidable. She had already come all the way here, so she could only grit her teeth and sit down as well.

Tan Lingling happened to come out at that moment, having put away her laundry. Seeing Miao Hua'er, she was a little astonished. "Hua'er-*jie*, why are you here?"

Tan Lingling hadn't taken what happened during the card game to heart at all. She had only returned the seeding machine because she was worried Miao Hua'er would mind. Besides, borrowing things from others was a favor owed, as well as a trouble to them, and the Jiangs had been planning on buying a seeding machine anyway.

“Come sit. I’ll make you a cup of tea,” Tan Lingling said warmly. She topped up Li Zhuo’s cup, explaining, “Zhuo-*jie* just got here. She wants to lend us her seeding machine, and we’re just discussing it.”

Miao Hua’er glanced at Li Zhuo a little uncomfortably. “Oh, Shubao’s mother has already agreed to lend it…?” she asked awkwardly.

Li Zhuo took a sip of tea. Unlike the other women of the village, her skin was fair and smooth, and she looked very gentle and scholarly, with an air of extreme reserve.

“We only have a small one.” Her voice was very soft, and even the breath she exhaled seemed fragile and delicate. “If you’re willing to lend the bigger one your family has, Hua’er-*jie*, our family won’t have to bring ours out and embarrass ourselves.”

This was the first time Miao Hua’er had heard Li Zhuo speak. To be shown such admiration, Miao Hua’er’s entire body heated up, her face flushing. It was unclear if it was due to shame or guilt. “I’ll lend ours! I’ll lend ours!“ she said hurriedly. “This is such a small matter. Ling-*mei*, you should have told me earlier.”

Tan Lingling’s gaze bounced between the two, then laughed. “You both have the kindness of Buddha, why are you guys being so courteous to each other?”

Miao Hua’er was no longer blushing. She had always been very straightforward and direct. Pretending to slap herself on the mouth a few times, she told Li Zhuo, “Ah, I’ve always talked too much. Zhuo-*mei*, please don’t take it to heart.”

Li Zhuo smiled, still looking very gentle and delicate. “I don’t know anything,” she replied, blinking innocently.

As soon as she said that, she began laughing. Seeing her laugh, Tan Lingling joined in as well, even teasing Miao Hua’er, “Zhuo-*jie*’s very good at cards! Next time, I’ll bring her to your game. Remember to bring more money with you!”

“*Aiyoh*, as if I’ll definitely lose!” Now that the topic had turned to cards, Miao Hua’er’s confidence was back, and she no longer acted so courteously. “Watch out, or I’ll make you two lose your pants!”

When returning, Jiang Shen was a little confused upon hearing all the laughter inside the house. He had a dance class later in the afternoon, and when his father had brought him his lunch at noon, he gobbled everything down quickly. To save time, he had casually rinsed his feet with the hose in the field, then hurried home with Goumao on his scooter.

With sharp eyes, Tan Lingling saw her son. “Greet your aunties… your shoes are in your room!”

Jiang Shen greeted the women obediently. He did not have time to wonder why they were at his house, and rushed into his room to grab his ballet shoes. Hanging them around his neck, he soon made his way back outside.

Chasing after him, Tan Lingling shouted, “Take some money with you!”

He had no choice but to return and grab a handful of coins.

Miao Hua'er was puzzled. "Where is he going?"

Walking back to the table, Tan Lingling replied, "We've signed him up for dance classes at the Children's Center. He's going to class now."

Even Li Zhuo was a little surprised. "Shen-*zi* knows how to dance?"

Tan Lingling waved her hand unconcernedly. "He's learning!"

With his ballet shoes swinging around his neck, Jiang Shen sprinted along the path between the fields, running past farms and canals. The owner of the rental bookstore tidied up the newspapers that had been ruffled into a mess by the wind with his pipe in his mouth. Looking up, he saw Jiang Shen shooting past, and yelled after him, "Slow down!"

Jiang Shen turned around, waving at him, the sunlight and breeze fluttering through his fringe.

The bus heading to the city was about to drive off. Chasing after it, he shouted, "Wait, wait!"

The driver stopped, and Jiang Shen bounded up the steps.

"Be careful, don't trip!" the driver scolded laughingly.

Panting, Jiang Shen thanked him. He packed away the shoes hanging around his neck, obediently moving to the back row and taking a seat there.

In the end, he was still a little late arriving at the Children's Center. Miss Lin did not say anything, simply letting him go and change.

There were around a dozen girls in the class, and Jiang Shen was the only boy. He wore a singlet and shorts that Tan Lingling had modified. There was no heating in the corridor going from the changing room to the dance studio, and he jogged back while hugging himself, shivering. When Miss Lin introduced him to the class, the other girls were all gathered together, looking at him curiously.

In all his years of life, Jiang Shen had never been stared at by so many girls before. Without realizing it, he blushed.

"He's so tanned," a girl in the front row whispered.

Another said, "Because he's a boy."

Jiang Shen did not know where to place his hands and feet.

"You can stand in front," Miss Lin said kindly. Clapping her hands, she continued, "We'll do our warmups now."

The girls scattered immediately, forming groups of twos and threes to do their stretches. Jiang Shen stood to the side blankly, before finally remembering the backbend and splits he had learned previously, and started doing them like how he had been taught. Just as he was doing the backbend, a girl looked over at him.

"Do you know how to do the splits?" She took the initiative to talk to him.

He nodded. “Yes.” As though afraid that she would not believe him, he swiftly performed a vertical split.

The girl did a horizontal split. “What about this?”

Jiang Shen copied her accordingly. She stood up, moving behind him. “I’ll help you press your back down.”

Jiang Shen felt a weight on his back. In an instant, the entire upper half of his body was plastered onto the floor.

“Wow.” The girl was a little startled. “You’re so flexible.”

Just as she finished speaking, all the other girls gathered around them. There were even some who kneeled down next to him, crouching down to see if he really was lying flat on the ground.

“This is the first time I’ve seen a boy this flexible,” a slightly older girl said.

Jiang Shen was baffled. “There are other boys too?”

“You’re the only one here, but there’s a boxing gym next door, and there are only boys over there.”

They were like little birds, tugging him up and running next door in a cluster. A class happened to be going on there as well, and around a dozen boys were standing in two rows. They stood there at attention, arms behind their backs.

“They can’t even do the splits,” the girl said, gloating, “do you see that boy there? He seems to be around your age.”

Jiang Shen looked in the direction she was pointing at, and a boy standing at the end of the first row suddenly looked over.

Before Jiang Shen could get a clear view, the girls pressed down on his head, forcing him to duck. “He looked over!”

“He’s so fierce! He even glared at me…”

After some struggling, Jiang Shen finally managed to extricate himself out of their hands.

“You can’t be like them,” the girls said sternly, and with great earnestness as they gathered around him, “they’re always dirty and smelly. They’re so gross.”

★

Bai Jinyi only turned his head back to the front unwillingly after his coach called him by name. He had a pair of upturned eyes, and his eyebrows were dark and thick, giving him a grave, serious air. Considering his age, his features had yet to fully develop, but that did not affect how he seemed to always be looking down on others.

“What are you looking at?!” the coach yelled.

Bai Jinyi did not speak, but the boy next to him laughed mockingly. “He’s looking at those little swans.”

The rest of the group burst into laughter, and none of it sounded friendly.

“What are you laughing at?!” the coach asked sternly. “Those who are laughing, go do jump squats around the room!”

Bai Jinyi did not move, while the other boys dispersed unwillingly. Some even bumped into his shoulder rudely when walking past him. “What’s with the arrogance? So what if you’re rich?” they grumbled quietly.

The boy still looked as though he could not be bothered to speak. He went to the side, sitting down and wrapping his hands. When he looked out again, the group of little swans had already run off.

The girls clustered around Jiang Shen, chattering away as they returned to the dance studio. With her arms crossed, Miss Lin was standing by the door, frowning. “Going out to stir up trouble again? Have you all finished your warmups?”

The oldest girl in the group was called Song Xin, and she sounded just like an adult when she spoke. “We did. Jiang Shen’s body is really flexible. Miss Lin, what will he be dancing?”

Upon hearing his name, Jiang Shen was extremely nervous. He stood up straight, not even daring to move his hands and feet. Miss Lin chuckled, giving it some thought. “With a boy, we can dance *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Moon*’s Reflection on the Second Spring.”

Jiang Shen didn't know what to say. He had absolutely no knowledge of these two dances, and it seemed like no one was bothering to ask him if he knew them either. On their own accord, the girls stood in a row next to the barre in front of the mirror, and Song Xin called out to him, “Come here, Jiang Shen.”

He could only obey, moving to stand behind her. Miss Lin put the music on, and called out the rhythm while clapping to the beat, “1—2— Lift your hands! Deep breaths! Tuck in your tummy! Point your toes firmly when tapping the floor! Straighten, and bend.”

Jiang Shen dared not slack off in the slightest. He copied Song Xin closely, following in confusion. Miss Lin walked over to him, placing her palm on the back of his waist. “Straighten up, don’t let your head hang down loosely.”

He listened and obeyed, toes pointed with all his might. He had paused halfway through the move, not daring to put his foot back down on the ground.

Miss Lin looked up from his feet. “Can you continue holding this position?”

He nodded firmly. “I can.”

She laughed. “What a good boy.”

Each class was only a little more than two hours, and Jiang Shen could not remain in the studio afterwards to continue practicing. For one, he dared not do so, and two, he was about to miss the last bus home.

The girls took a long time in the changing room, so taking advantage of every moment he could, he practiced everything he had learned today. After changing, Miss Lin came in to see him lying on his front, legs swaying in the air as he

recorded something in his notebook.

Approaching him, she asked, “What are you writing?”

It was too late for him to even think about hiding his notebook. He stood up, face pink. “Uhh, *The Moon’s Reflection on the Second Spring*, and *Sleeping Beauty…”*

Miss Lin understood. “How about I bring my computer tomorrow, and play them for you?”

His eyes shone brightly. “Really?”

“Of course.” She wanted to laugh.

Song Xin was done changing, and happened to come in at that moment. Seeing that Jiang Shen was still around, she asked happily, “Want to tidy up the studio with me?”

Jiang Shen was naturally more than eager to do so. He glanced at the clock, changed quickly, and went to the storeroom to grab a broom and mop. As he walked down the corridor with a bucket, the door of the boxing gym across the hall opened suddenly, and someone walked out.

Bai Jinyi was covered in sweat. It looked like he had only just removed his headgear — his damp hair was flat in some places and sticking up in others. He had yet to take his boxing gloves off, and he looked up to see Jiang Shen in front of him.

He did not say a word.

Jiang Shen cowered a little, then mustered up his courage to greet him. “H-hello.”

Bai Jinyi frowned. “Who are you?”

“I’m a dance student from next door,” Jiang Shen replied honestly.

The other raised a thick, dark brow. “You’re a little swan?”

Jiang Shen blinked.

“There are little boy swans?”

Jiang Shen did not know how to answer the question. With both of his hands around the bucket handle, he looked into the eyes of the other boy feebly.

Someone's voice rang out from within the boxing gym. “Yo, who’s Richie Rich Bai speaking to?”

Bai Jinyi’s expression frosted over. He turned around, shielding Jiang Shen behind him entirely. “You still want a fight?” he asked in a sneering tone.

Then, he turned back to look at Jiang Shen, speaking impatiently, “Why are you still standing here?”

Jiang Shen did not want to cause any trouble. Hunching over, he carried his bucket and ran off. After Bai Jinyi was completely out of sight, he started worrying about

how he had forgotten to thank the boy.

“What are you doing?” Holding a rag, Song Xin looked at him. “Who did you run into?”

Jiang Shen thought about it, then decided to share the incident with her. “I saw someone from the boxing gym.”

“Which one?” she asked curiously.

He gestured around his head, comparing the boy's height to his own. “He’s around my height, and he’s called… Rich… Richie Rich Bai?”

“Ohh… Bai Jinyi? He’s studying at the international school, and is the one we said was very fierce, always glaring at us. His eyebrows are extremely thick, right?”

Jiang Shen touched his own eyebrows reflexively.

“In the future, just ignore him when you see him.” Song Xin raised her chin proudly. “We’re all little fairies here, understand?”

It was nighttime when Jiang Shen caught the last bus. His ballet shoes hung around his neck, and he was so exhausted that he did not want to move. Sitting in the backseat, he almost slept his way back to the village, only making his way down the bus slowly, rubbing his eyes, after the bus driver had woken him up.

The little village bookstore was still open. Following the shadow cast by the streetlights, Jiang Shen jumped into the store. The old man was smoking his pipe, and he glanced up at him. “You’re back?”

Jiang Shen removed his shoes from his neck. “I’m back. *Yeye*, do you know *The Moon’s Reflection on the Second Spring* and *Sleeping Beauty*?”

“Huh?” The old man’s eyes widened. “One is by the blind man Abing, and the other is a fairy tale. Why are you asking?”

“Not those. I’m talking about the dances.”

The old man sighed. “What nonsense,” he grumbled. After a pause, he continued, “Wait a moment.”

Jiang Shen waited outside obediently.

Rummaging through his cabinets and boxes for some time, the old man returned with a book — *The Complete Series of China’s Ballets and Operas*.

“Do you want to read this here?” the old man asked.

Jiang Shen was a little troubled. “I haven’t eaten yet…”

The man hurried him off. “Come back after dinner. I’ll keep the book for you.”

Gasping, Jiang Shen said gratefully, “*Yeye*, you’re the best! I’ll massage your legs for you later!”

The old man knocked his pipe against the table. “Scram, you little brat! I was nearly crippled by your massage the last time!” he said angrily.

Tan Lingling had long since finished preparing dinner, and was waiting for her son. As soon as he got home, Jiang Shen was asked to go wash his hands. Jiang Luoshan was already seated, shucking peanuts and tossing them at Tony, who was standing by the gate of the yard.

The wild chicken was enjoying its snack, holding its wings out in joy and shaking its colorful tail, looking as though it was performing a *yangge*, a Chinese folk dance. Seeing that, Tan Lingling was amused. “Look, even our chicken is a born dancer.”

Jiang Luoshan could not resist jabbing at his wife. “How can you compare them? Is our son running around like a chicken with its head cut off?”

She rolled her eyes. “How uncultured you are, to say something like that.”

Thinking about the book, Jiang Shen wished that he could just pour his entire dinner into his mouth and be done. Tan Lingling could not continue watching. “Slow down, why are you in such a hurry?”

With his mouth full, Jiang Shen mumbled, “Goin’ to the boo’ shtore to rea’ a boo’.”

Jiang Luoshan frowned. “Didn’t you say you wouldn’t read any more comics? Why are you still going there?”

Finally, Jiang Shen managed to swallow his mouthful of food. “It’s not a comic. It’s a book about ballet.”

“What did you practice today? Was it difficult?” Tan Lingling asked.

“Not difficult.” Jiang Shen put his bowl down, wiping his mouth and wanting to leave immediately. “I’m going now.”

In the end, before he could even step outside his yard, Goumao came over.

“Where are you going?” For some reason, Goumao had recently been influenced by some trend, and staunchly refused to cut his hair. Now, his fringe nearly covered his eyes, and Jiang Shen could barely recognize him in the dark. “Where’s the chicken?”

Jiang Shen pointed at the yard. “Tony!” he shouted.

The wild chicken immediately stretched its neck up, crowing vigorously.

That scared Goumao. “What are you shouting for?! I was only confirming if it was around, I didn’t ask you to call it here!”

“It doesn’t peck people anymore. It’s super obedient now, and it even lets people hug it.”

Goumao sniffed disapprovingly. “You’re crazy, liking a chicken.”

Jiang Shen could not be bothered to argue with him. He was afraid that the old man at the bookstore would not wait for him if he was late, but with Goumao around, he could not go. With no other choice, he suppressed his frustrations and asked, “Why are you here?”

Goumao finally seemed to remember why he had come over. With a toss of his head, his eyes were finally revealed. “Want to watch a movie?”

Of course Jiang Shen did not want to do that. “What about Qingling-*zi*?”

Goumao snorted. “She’s been kidnapped by Shubao.” He seemed to feel a little unreconciled, continuing resentfully, “Last time, he was still calling her a stupid, little girl. Look at how he’s doting on her now.”

Seeing Goumao like this, Jiang Shen knew he definitely wouldn’t be able to get rid of him tonight. “I’m going to the bookstore. Do you want to come along?” he asked, resigned, with no other choice.

Goumao threw an arm around his shoulders. “Of course I’ll come!” he answered glibly. “Look at how much I’m doting on you!”

Jiang Shen was speechless.

The old man had left a lamp on by the curtain over the entrance of the bookstore, and only stood up to turn on the lights inside when he saw Jiang Shen. However, as soon as he noticed that Guomao was behind him, his expression darkened immediately.

Goumao was rather shameless. “Hello, *Yeye*.”

“Hello, my ass!” The old man grabbed an old newspaper and threw it at him. “Tell me! How many books do you owe me?! Where are they?!”

Shielding his head, Goumao tried to look pitiful. “It’s not like you don’t know how my mother’s temper is!”

The old man was so angry, his beard swayed from his heavy breathing. “Even Miao Hua’er has to greet me politely whenever she sees me!”

“Yes, yes!” Goumao said perfunctorily. “Can you teach her a lesson on my behalf?”

The old man spat. “You unfilial child!”

Goumao simply behaved as though he had gone deaf, and squeezed into the bookstore. He also liked to read comics, and stooping down, he squirreled all the way inside.

The old man was still panting from rage. Jiang Shen was truly afraid his anger would turn to him instead, so he took the initiative, rolling up his sleeves and preparing to massage the old man’s legs. The latter nearly burst from fury. “Were you boys born to jinx me?!”

Pitifully, Jiang Shen answered with a faltering, “No…”

The old man tossed the book at him. “Go to a corner and read it!”

Jiang Shen immediately took the book and hurried to one side happily.

The old man was at a loss for words.

Because Jiang Shen was worried that Goumao would suddenly pop up and see that he was reading a book about dancing, he deliberately took a comic book to hide the

one he was actually reading. With a book inside another book, his deception was barely noticeable. After confirming a few times that, as of right now, Goumao had no time to care about him, Jiang Shen finally started looking through his book in earnest.

After some time, the old man turned to look at the child.

Jiang Shen was currently engrossed in his book. It was unclear what he was looking at, but as he flipped through the pages, he was sniffling, and his eyes had reddened.

Nudging his glasses, the old man chuckled silently. Very carefully, he adjusted the lamp on the wall.

The dim, yellow light lit up half of Jiang Shen's face, and the shadows of his eyelashes were cast sharply upon the book.

★

Crawling out of bed early in the morning, Jiang Shen's eyes were both swollen. He was still rather tired, and groping about, he finished getting dressed right as Tan Lingling entered.

"Wow, what sort of upsetting dreams did you have last night?" She studied her son's eyes carefully. "I'll prepare a damp cloth for you."

He mumbled an acknowledgement. After thinking for a moment, he shoved his feet into his slippers and left his room.

Tan Lingling waited for Jiang Shen to finish brushing his teeth before handing him the towel, telling him to hold it against his eyes.

"*Baba* went to the fields?" Tilting his head up, Jiang Shen sat on a little stool. Despite his age, he was never careless when it came to helping his family out with the farm work. He was afraid that when things got busy, his father, Jiang Luoshan, would hurt his back again.

Tan Lingling was boiling an egg. Hearing her son, she laughed. "It's fine now. We borrowed a seeding machine."

Jiang Shen lifted up a corner of the towel, feeling quite happy about this. "From Shubao's family?"

"Your Auntie Hua'er lent it." She cooled the egg, then handed it to her son. "Roll that around your eyes yourself. Once you're done, eat it. Don't waste it."

Tony was sorting out its colorful tail. The weather was great, the sun pleasing and lovely. Not needing to plant any shoots, Jiang Shen did not know what to do with himself. He fed Tony some peanuts while rolling the egg over his eyes. The chicken had a very good relationship with him, and when it was finally full, it leaned against him, taking a nap.

He only bit into the egg once his eyes were no longer swollen. Tony woke up, coming to peck at the last bits of yolk in his hand.

"Hey!" He raised his arm up. "How can you eat your own offspring?!"

Inside the house, Tan Lingling heard him and guffawed loudly. “It’s male, it can’t lay eggs.”

Jiang Shen looked at what was left of his egg sorrowfully.

Having changed, Tan Lingling was about to head into the fields to take a look. At the door, she turned towards her son. “Are you still going to the bookstore today?”

“No, I finished the book last night.” Thinking about *The Moon’s Reflection on the Second Spring*, he became sad again, and rubbed his face. “I need to do my stretches.”

“*Aiyoh*.” Tan Lingling bent down, kissing her son. “Our Shenshen is so hardworking.”

Their house was not a dance studio, so it did not have wood flooring, and the floor in Jiang Shen’s small room was made of cement. He pulled out the straw mat that he slept on in the summer, laid it across the ground, then changed into his ballet shoes and pants.

He was now very familiar with practicing his backbends and splits. Silently counting the beats, his legs were extended away from each other in a mostly straight line, and his belly and chest were pressed right against the mat.

In the dance studio, the older girls like Song Xin were already very good at standing en pointe, and she could even perform a small dance segment quite well on her toes. As such, Song Xin usually played the role of the female lead in Miss Lin’s choreography.

Jiang Shen stared at the tips of his toes for a while. Unable to resist, he stood up, and placed his toes on the floor, ready to go en pointe.

A while ago, their family’s full-length mirror had been moved into his room. With his arms on his hips, and one of his legs bent, he seemed to be pondering over how exactly to go en pointe. He glanced at the mirror, recalling how Song Xin looked on her toes. Summoning all of his effort, he spread his arms out, but right as he placed his weight on his toes, Tony suddenly gave a vigorous crow from the yard.

“Shen-*zi*! Quick, come out and chase this chicken away!” Goumao yelled from the gate.

No response came from Jiang Shen.

Jiang Shen curled his hands around the tips of his toes. He was in so much pain that tears were about to roll down his cheeks, and with no other choice, he could only remove his shoes and shove them under his bed. He took a quick look at his toes; they appeared to be fine, so he put on his slippers and limped outside.

Goumao was trying his best to shield his head, running around everywhere, dodging. Ever since Tony the chicken had come to Jiang Shen’s place, it had put on a lot of weight due to the excellent food. Its size did not seem to affect its valiant spirit though. Its colorful tail drew an arc in the air, spreading its wings and practically flying. Jumping up, it pecked fiercely at the back of Goumao’s neck.

“Oww!” he screamed. “Jiang Shen! Quick, make it go away!”

Jiang Shen had no choice but to shoo Tony away. “Why are you here again?”

Goumao stood far away from Jiang Shen, afraid that the chicken would start chasing after him once more. “I’m here to take you to the fields to see that huge seeding machine of ours!”

“What’s there to see about a seeding machine?”

“What are you doing at home, then?” He looked down, frowning. “What happened to your foot?”

“I accidentally bumped into something,” Jiang Shen answered, unbothered.

“Hah, as if.” Goumao pushed him to take a seat in the yard. “You’re bleeding!”

It was only then that Jiang Shen realized that the nail of one of his big toes seemed to have split a little. There wasn’t that much blood, and Jiang Shen was able to wipe it clean quite quickly. It was not very painful, and after massaging his toes, he didn’t feel that there was anything wrong with them.

“Get me a nail clipper,” he instructed Goumao.

Goumao was clearly used to being ordered around at home by Qingling-*zi*. With no sense of superiority that was expected of someone older, he went inside the house dutifully and retrieved a nail clipper for Jiang Shen.

Taking advantage of the sunlight, Jiang Shen clipped all ten of his toenails. While clipping, he asked Goumao, “My father’s driving the seeding machine?”

The other laughed. “He’s a good driver. At first, Chen Laoshi still wanted to help him, but now he’s not needed at all.”

Jiang Shen was rather disapproving. “How can you call your father by his name?”

Goumao pursed his lips. “In my family, it’s my mom who towers above all. Chen Laoshi’s status can’t even be compared to me or Qingling-*zi*.”

He raised his hand, stuck his fingers out, and tapped them one by one with a frank expression. “It’s my mother, then my sister, then our French bulldog… then me, then Chen Laoshi.”

Jiang Shen laughed so hard, he nearly dropped his nail clippers. Seeing that he was now more joyful, Goumao sighed with relief. “With the way you were crying yesterday, I really thought that something had happened to you.”

Jiang Shen threw the nail clippers at him. “I was crying because of the book!”

“Do you have a problem?” the other asked scornfully. “A boy crying while reading a comic for girls?”

Jiang Shen had no response to that.

After lunch, he was heading to the Children’s Center again. Tan Lingling specially prepared two eggs for him to bring along. “Have them when you’re hungry. You got your shoes?”

Crouching on the floor of his room, he grabbed the ribbons under his bed and pulled them out. “Got them.”

He put on a backpack, shoved his clothes and shoes inside, then tucked the eggs in too. “I’m going!”

“Money!” Tan Lingling reminded him. “Be careful on the road.”

Jiang Shen ran all the way to the bus stop. Passing by the village bookstore, he saw the old man by the curtains, his head bent down as he read his newspaper.

“*Yeye*!” Jiang Shen called out to him.

From behind his reading glasses, the old man shifted his gaze upwards lazily. Upon seeing that it was Jiang Shen, he waved his hand somewhat impatiently.

Jiang Shen tidied up his hair. With a solemn expression, he held his arms out and spun three hundred and sixty degrees on one leg, ending it with a bow, as though he was taking a curtain call.

The old man was surprised for a moment, then could not help but scold him with a laugh. “You brat! How annoying!”

Jiang Shen grinned so hard, his eyes almost disappearing. Again, he waved his hand at the old man, then hurried off for the bus.

Once it reached April and May, the weather warmed up quickly. Entering the dance studio, he saw colors strewn all over the room; ballet skirts and shoes were everywhere, and under the rays of the sun, they were as pretty as butterflies.

Song Xin was the first to see him. “Why are you even more tanned now?” she grumbled a little unhappily.

He looked at his arms, feeling somewhat embarrassed. “I have to help out at home. We’re always outdoors.”

“You won’t look good if your skin is tanned,” another girl said. “You need to apply sunscreen.”

He did not understand. “What’s sunscreen?”

Song Xin hurried him off to change. “I’ll apply some for you later!”

Miss Lin walked into the studio to see Jiang Shen sitting cross-legged in one corner, a group of girls surrounding him and applying all sorts of things to his face. The adolescent girls had no makeup products other than the lipsticks they had stolen from their mothers — not only were his lips and cheeks painted, there was also a red dot between his brows.

Miss Lin wanted to laugh. “Don’t bully Jiang Shen, he’s a boy.”

“But he’s too dark, just like those boys next door,” the girls all clamored.

Miss Lin tugged Jiang Shen up. It was unknown what brand of sunscreen had been smeared onto him, but the skin of his face and neck were two separate colors.

“Go wash up.” She took out a bottle of makeup remover and some cotton pads from her bag. “Pour some onto the cotton pad and wipe slowly. Once your face is clean,

rinse again with water.”

Jiang Shen had never used something so stylish before, and had never even seen something like this on his mother’s dressing table. While walking to the washroom, he earnestly memorized the instructions Miss Lin had given him, only to see someone already by the sink when he arrived.

Bai Jinyi was again covered in sweat. Pushing his head under the tap, he let the water splash onto his face. Jiang Shen drew closer, then realized that the other boy was actually a little shorter than him by about half the length of a segment of his finger.

The other wiped off his face, straightening up. His thick, dark brows were tightly furrowed.

For some reason, Jiang Shen was a little fearful of him. He took the initiative to explain. “I came to wash my face…”

“Who drew all that?” Bai Jinyi asked.

“The girls,” Jiang Shen answered slowly.

The boy snorted. “How girly.”

Jiang Shen gave him a look, slightly unhappy, and turned on the tap silently.

Bai Jinyi did not leave, and Jiang Shen ignored him. Clumsily, he followed the instructions Miss Lin had given him, pouring the makeup remover onto the cotton pad. As there was no mirror at the sink, he could only wipe at his face randomly.

“There’s still some on your left cheek,” Bai Jinyi suddenly said.

Jiang Shen paused. He hesitated for a moment, then obediently wiped at that spot anyway.

“The right. A little more to the right,” Bai Jinyi commanded. He clicked his tongue. “Why are you so stupid?”

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Picking up the bottle of makeup remover, Bai Jinyi poured a little onto a cotton pad. “Come here,” he spoke impatiently, looking at him.

Jiang Shen wasn’t very willing. “I can do it myself…”

The other sneered. He turned his head, pulling off his right boxing glove with his teeth and held it there in his mouth. Then he took his phone out and aimed it at Jiang Shen’s face with no warning, taking a photo. After that, he turned the screen towards Jiang Shen, showing him.

Perhaps Jiang Shen was very photogenic, or perhaps Bai Jinyi’s candid shot had been taken with a much-too-steady hand, because the photo was not blurry at all. Every detail and flaw had been captured sharply, and it showed how the lipstick on Jiang Shen’s face had been smeared everywhere. With his good looks, that red dot

between his brows, and his somewhat foolish expression, the image was quite amusing.

Bai Jinyi put his phone away. Not caring at all about Jiang Shen's reaction, he tossed his gloves to one side, pressing the cotton pad onto Jiang Shen's face. "Open your mouth."

Jiang Shen did not know what to say.

★

The makeup remover was cool, but through the cotton pad, Bai Jinyi's hand was toasty warm. He actually wasn't too experienced with removing makeup either, but at the very least, he could see what he was doing, unlike Jiang Shen who had basically smeared the makeup all over his face.

When the cotton pad wiped over the center of his brows, Jiang Shen felt ticklish, and giggled a little.

Bai Jinyi looked at him. "Why are you laughing?"

Jiang Shen was no longer as scared of him as before, and he shrank away a little. "It tickles…"

The other frowned. "Why are you so delicate?"

Jiang Shen did not want to be called delicate again, so he stood still and did not move. He waited for Bai Jinyi to finish cleaning his face with the cotton pad, then gathered up some water in his hands and splashed his own face a couple of times. After washing, he looked up and leaned in close to Bai Jinyi. "Is it clean now?" he asked.

Bai Jinyi had just pulled his boxing gloves back on. Seeing that Jiang Shen's face was way too close, he pressed a glove against the boy's cheek, pushing him away lightly. Caught off guard, Jiang Shen's lips were squashed into a pout.

"…What are you doing?"

Bai Jinyi seemed to think that this was fun, and did not put his glove down. "You're not going back to class?"

Jiang Shen's voice came out muffled. "I'll go once I finish washing my face."

"How old are you?"

"Traditionally, I'll be 9 this June."

"Oh."

Jiang Shen glanced at him. "You're younger than me?"

"Says who?" Bai Jinyi put his glove down. "I'm also traditionally 9."

Jiang Shen laughed. Although Bai Jinyi looked very fierce, he was not mean. He waited in the corridor for Jiang Shen to finish tidying up his things, then the two headed back to their studio and gym respectively. Bai Jinyi seemed to be quite curious about his ballet shoes, looking down at them frequently. In the end, he could not help himself from asking, “Doesn’t the front of your shoe hurt your foot?”

Jiang Shen lifted his foot up. “I was a little unused to it before, but after getting used to it, it stopped hurting.”

The other glanced at his shoes again, but did not say a word.

Jiang Shen seemed to want to chat with him a little while more. He was the only boy in the dance studio after all, and was unable to join in on many of the girls’ conversations. Even if he liked dancing, it was still lonely to not have anybody to play with during such a high-spirited age.

Bai Jinyi was rather reticent, just listening to Jiang Shen talk the entire walk back. Upon drawing closer to the gym, someone happened to walk out, and when he saw Bai Jinyi and Jiang Shen together, he froze for a moment.

“Oh? What are you guys up to?” The guy seemed to be much older, and was a head taller than Jiang Shen. “Who is this?”

That question was clearly directed at Bai Jinyi.

“A little swan from next door,” he answered, then looked at Jiang Shen. “You should go back to class now.”

“Oh.” Jiang Shen looked at the boy who was a head taller than him, and the other was looking right back with a disingenuous smile.

“Jiang Shen! Quick, come in!” Song Xin shouted from the door of the dance studio.

He hurried over. “I’m coming!”

As he left, he could not help turning back to look. Bai Jinyi seemed to know he would do so, and raised his eyebrow haughtily.

Song Xin pulled Jiang Shen into the studio, her tone somewhat unhappy. “Didn’t I tell you not to play with them?”

He handed the makeup remover and cotton pads back to Miss Lin. “We just happened to bump into each other. Who’s that very tall boy?”

Song Xin leaned closer to his ear, whispering, “He’s this year's youth champion of the city’s boxing championship. His name is Lai Song.” After thinking for a moment, she added, “He’s older than all of us, and is either in his second or third year of junior high. Don’t provoke him.”

“Ok,” he answered, then was dragged off to stand in a row with the rest of the girls. Miss Lin gave a few instructions on what they would be learning today, then dismissed them to do their warmups. Calling Jiang Shen to the front, she spoke to him gently, “We’ll start pressing down on your toes today. If it begins to hurt, just tell me.”

Jiang Shen didn't really understand. “What does that mean?”

“In ballet, there's this thing called 'en pointe', but it’s not something that can be done immediately,” she explained, then gestured for Jiang Shen to hold onto the barre and lift one leg. “Straighten your calf… good, point your foot as well.” Her palm wrapped around the top of his foot, and she slowly placed pressure on it, along with his toes. “Continue to point. Hold it. Good.”

Holding his breath, Jiang Shen put all of his efforts into pointing his foot. He was not sure how much time had passed before Miss Lin finally let go.

“Your tolerance level is really high, huh?” She smiled at him. “You can tell me if it hurts.”

He reddened. “It doesn’t…”

She shook her head, gesturing for him to sit down with his legs extended. “Take off your shoes.”

He removed them obediently. “What happened to your big toe?” she exclaimed upon seeing his toes.

“I bumped my foot at home today. It doesn’t hurt.”

Miss Lin sighed, then expressed a rare moment of sternness. “From now on, your toes are your entire life. You must take good care of them.”

Jiang Shen quickly nodded. Following her instructions, he continued pointing his feet, trying his best to curl his toes towards his soles.

“Going forward, you need to practice like this every day,” Miss Lin said slowly as she held his heels. “At home, eat lots of chicken and beef; boiled, no oil, and don't add too much salt. Eat more eggs, less candy, and drink milk, too… Can you remember all that?”

He finally caught up to her words. “Huh?”

She laughed. “Forget it, I’ll tell your mother instead.”

Tan Lingling came by in the afternoon to deliver vegetables, and made a special trip to the dance studio to watch her son practice. Miss Lin had brought her laptop, from which she played a dance segment from *The Moon’s Reflection on the Second Spring* as she taught the children its basic steps.

Jiang Shen was learning very seriously. His arms were flexible yet powerful, and the arc of his spin was beautiful. After a few more tries, he actually kind of looked good. Standing by the window, Tan Lingling watched for a while, and could not help but smile. She went over to the door, softly calling out to Miss Lin a few times. The latter noticed her and walked over.

“We just harvested these vegetables today.” Tan Lingling pushed a few bags at her enthusiastically. “Try them at home, Miss Lin.”

The other felt very sheepish. “Lingling-*jie*, you always give me so much every time you come. How could I be so unabashed as to accept them all?”

“No, no, there’s no need to feel abashed. Our Shenshen still needs you to take good care of him.”

“Jiang Shen is so obedient, it’s my pleasure.” To make Tan Lingling feel at ease, Miss Lin accepted the vegetables, then told her about Jiang Shen’s dietary needs, astonishing her. “He has to eat that much?”

Miss Lin wanted to laugh. “It’s not that he has to eat that much in one meal, but that these have to be the bulk of his meals from now on.”

Tan Lingling frowned slightly, deep in thought.

“Dancing requires energy too,” Miss Lin persuaded, “boys will only be able to gain energy and muscle by eating those things. He has to stick to this diet as much as possible.”

When the class ended, Jiang Shen once again took the initiative to stay behind and tidy up the room. Every day, he would use this opportunity to practice his basics one more time, humming a tune as he tapped to the beat. While returning the bucket, he walked past the boxing gym and saw Bai Jinyi again.

Lai Song was there as well. Both of them were in the boxing ring, with Lai Song holding onto a boxing shield. Bai Jinyi’s punches were very fast, and the sounds of his fists hitting the shield were terrifying — as for anything else, Jiang Shen did not understand what he was seeing. Poking his head in, he watched for a little while. Lai Song was the first to notice him.

“Little Swan.” Lai Song’s sharp incisors were revealed whenever he smiled. “Why are you here?”

Bai Jinyi turned, his face covered in sweat once again. Raising his arm, he wiped his face with his sleeve.

“I was cleaning up,” Jiang Shen said. “I’m about to leave.”

Lai Song walked to the edge of the ring. Hanging over the ropes, he waved Jiang Shen over.

Jiang Shen put the bucket down, then slowly made his way towards them.

Drinking from his water bottle, Bai Jinyi asked, “You’re alone?”

Jiang Shen looked at his bottle curiously. “Yes.”

Lai Song laughed. “What are you looking at?”

Embarrassed, Jiang Shen averted his eyes. Lai Song understood implicitly. “You’ve never seen a water bottle like this before, right?” he teased. “Bai Jinyi’s family is really rich. Even his water bottle is branded.”

Bai Jinyi aimed a kick at him. “You’re talking too much.”

Lai Song did not dodge the kick, but scolded him with a laugh. “I’m your senior, you should be more respectful!”

Watching them argue, Jiang Shen was unable to join in the conversation, and stood there mutely. Lai Song suddenly eyed him. “It seems like your family background is so-so, right?”

Jiang Shen’s face warmed a little. He had a distinct accent when he spoke, and his clothes could not be considered good quality. He was well aware of what his family background was like, but had never given it much thought, nor did he feel that being poor was something bad. However, Lai Song bringing it to the spotlight like that… was a different matter entirely.

“You and Bai Jinyi are both pretty strange.” Lai Song pointed at them without any malicious intent. “As the saying goes, ‘a rich man’s son does not box, and a poor man’s son does not dance’, but the opposite goes for the two of you.”

“If he likes to dance, why can’t he?” Bai Jinyi finally spoke up.

“A boy dancing *Swan Lake*? Have you seen that before?” Lai Song asked.

“Y-yes, I have,” Jiang Shen suddenly stammered out. “I-I’ve looked it up.”

Bai Jinyi and Lai Song exchanged a glance, then settled on Jiang Shen’s face.

The latter blushed again, yet said very solemnly, “In the future, after I learn it, I’ll dance it for the both of you to see.”

Chapter 3 — Ballet Shoes

Things promised and agreements made in youth are the easiest to fulfill, and also the most moving to hear. At the time, Jiang Shen had yet to understand this; he was young, and all the things he thought about were sweet and good. When he heard others mention *Swan Lake*, he truly hoped that he would be able to dance it one day, and even wanted them to see it. With such a happy dream, even the foot stretches that he had to do every day were no longer that hard.

When Tan Lingling arrived home, she started worrying over how to meet the increased demand for her son's nutrition. After thinking for a long time, she could not help but fix her eyes upon Tony in the yard.

Jiang Luoshan wanted to laugh. "If you kill the chicken, Shen-*zi* will get angry with you."

She huffed at him. "Am I not allowed to look?"

He thought for a moment, then suggested, "Why don't we ask the Shens about the milk first?"

Even though the village's main industry was agriculture and aquaculture, and was not very developed in the matters of trade and commerce, its advantage was that it was located very close to a dairy farm, where Shen Shubao's father, Shen Guoliang, happened to work. The local milk brand was called Shuangxi, and it had been promoted in the village for a period of time before.

Having come to a decision, Tan Lingling went knocking on the Shen family's door. Shen Guoliang was not around, but Li Zhuo was.

"Zhuo-*jie,*" Tan Lingling greeted. "You're home from work so early today?"

Behind Li Zhuo was Shubao. He would be entering his second year of junior high this year, and was four years older than Jiang Shen.

Children went through their growth spurts earlier nowadays. Among his friends of similar age, Shubao was growing the fastest, and he already looked like a teenager. After greeting Tan Lingling, he returned to his room.

Li Zhuo poured her a cup of tea. "I just went to get a new pair of glasses for Shubao. I really don't know what he's been looking at, but his prescription is already at 200 degrees."

"Don't they say that only intelligent people wear glasses?" Tan Lingling chuckled.

"Oh please." Li Zhuo waved her hand, laughing. "How about your Shen-*zi*? Is he still dancing?"

"What else could he be doing?" Tan Lingling sighed. She found it a little difficult to speak, but in the end, still braced herself to do so. "I came today because I'd like to ask Shen-*dage* if he could help us get a daily delivery of milk. With Shenshen's dancing, his teacher said that he'll need to eat chicken, beef, drink milk, and eat more eggs… but you know what our family situation is like. We were wondering if we would be able to get any discounts, offers, or promotions of some sort by ordering through Shuangxi's employees."

She said everything in one go. Perhaps due to her embarrassment over the request, her face was a little red. She wrung her hands uneasily, then summoned the courage to continue, “If there’s really nothing that can be done, I’ll order something cheaper. I’m just afraid that the deliveries are fully booked already, and we won’t be able to get onto the list…”

Li Zhuo finally had to interrupt her, frowning. “Ling-*mei*, what are you even saying?”

Tan Lingling bit her lip. She didn’t respond, and couldn’t help but sigh again at the end.

Li Zhuo told her to wait a moment. She turned and entered another room, then came back out with a booklet, helping Tan Lingling fill it out. “I’ll get Guoliang to bring it to the farm tomorrow, and delivery will start next week. Just hand the money to the delivery man.”

Tan Lingling felt a little teary, repeating her thanks over and over several times. She thought that was still not enough to express her gratitude though, so before she left, she said, “I’m making wontons tonight, and I’ll get Shen-*zi* to bring some to you later. You must take them.”

Li Zhuo feigned annoyance, waving her away. “Alright, I got it. We’re all family here, why are you being so courteous?”

After Tan Lingling left, Li Zhuoput away the booklet for milk orders in an excellent mood. Just when she was about to call Shen Guoliang, Shubao suddenly came out of his room, glancing at the door. “Auntie Ling left?”

“Yes.” She did not think too much of his question. “Why did you come out? You finished your homework?”

Shubao adjusted his new glasses, his tone placid. “I did. I came out to grab a yogurt.”

Li Zhuo’s call had gone through. “Guoliang… ah, the yogurt’s in the fridge. Warm it up a little before drinking it.”

“Okay.” Shubao took the yogurt, then placed it casually on the desk in his room.

Jiang Shen knew nothing about his mother going to Shubao’s place to order milk. He took the bus home happily, and when he passed by the bookstore, the old man called out to him.

“How's dance been going recently?” he asked, his pipe in his mouth.

Jiang Shen’s ballet shoes were still around his neck, and it was only when he saw the old man that he remembered to put them back in his bag. “I can finally stand en pointe today, but I can’t hold it for too long. My teacher said I'm doing alright.”

The old man exhaled a breath of smoke. “Then you’ll have to press your feet at night. Are you pressing them while sleeping?”

“No, I can’t do that when I'm asleep.” With a pained face, Jiang Shen stuck his tongue out. “They’ll be numb the next day.”

The old man chuckled as he mumbled, “A boy practicing ballet… he’ll only suffer.” He pointed at Jiang Shen, telling him to wait.

Obediently, the boy remained waiting outside. The man lifted the curtain and bent down, rummaging through his things, then finally brought Jiang Shen a DVD. “Here, watch this.”

“What is it?”

“Didn’t you mention something about an all-male cast *Swan Lake* before? Here it is.”

Jiang Shen's eyes brightened. “Wow, *Yeye*! How do you have this?!”

The old man was rather pleased with himself. “What do I not have?”

Jiang Shen exclaimed happily. He threw his arms around the man’s neck, nuzzling his cheek. “Thank you, *Yeye*!”

The elder pushed him away in disdain. “Why are you clinging onto me? I’m renting it to you! Pay up!”

Jiang Shen returned home, hugging the DVD as though it was a treasure. Tan Lingling was making wontons, and upon seeing her son, she hurried him, “Change quickly and wash your hands, then deliver these wontons to Shubao’s family.”

“Deliver wontons?” He had yet to register what was going on. “Why are we giving them wontons?”

Tan Lingling clicked her tongue. “Just do as I ask! Why so many questions?”

Scratching his head, he obediently returned to his room to change his clothes. He took the DVD out, carefully blowing across the surface of the disc lightly. Holding it up, he stared at the circle in the center for some time, then his lips stretched into a grin slowly.

“Hurry up and come out! What are you dawdling in there for?” Tan Lingling shouted from outside.

“I’m coming, I’m coming.” Jiang Shen finished changing, then went to his mother and watched as she packed the wontons. She peered at him. “You’re smiling so brightly. Did something good happen?”

He immediately straightened his face. “No.”

She did not probe further, but did stroke his nose. “Go on, then. Remember to greet them, and do it sweetly.”

Shubao’s place was quite a distance from theirs, and Jiang Shen still had the demeanor of a child while walking through the fields with the bag. Due to the hot weather, he decided to remove his shoes, and along the way, he trapped quite a few loaches with his feet, only to release them all at the end.

The walk took him nearly fifteen minutes. He glanced at his feet, contemplating for some time, then ultimately went to the ditch to wash his feet clean before putting his shoes back on. Prior to stepping into Shubao's yard, he called out his greetings. "Uncle Guoliang, Auntie Zhuo! It's me, Shen-*zi*."

Shubao came out and opened the door for him. "Your mom called ten minutes ago. That walk of yours sure took a while."

Jiang Shen smiled in embarrassment. Li Zhuo and Shen Guoliang were both around, and with the food already on the dinner table, they insisted that he stay and join them.

"If I don't go home for dinner, my mom will beat me." Even when outside, he still feared Tan Lingling more.

Li Zhuo had no choice but to let him go, but before doing so, she packed up a box of food and passed it to him. "Bring this back to your mom."

He hesitated for a moment, but still accepted it.

When he was heading back, Shubao took it upon himself to walk him to the fields. Right as Jiang Shen was about to leave, the other called out to him.

"Shen-*zi*." The setting sun had nearly disappeared into the horizon. Shubao was wearing his new glasses, the expression on his face a little hard to read in the dusk. "Are you…"

Jiang Shen tilted his head. "What?"

The older boy opened his mouth. He seemed to be deliberating on whether or not he should mention what he knew, but in the end, he gave up. "Forget it," he mumbled.

Jiang Shen was baffled.

"Hold on."

"Oh, ok," he responded. Shubao returned home, running back out after a time.

"This is for you." He handed a yogurt to Jiang Shen.

Jiang Shen blinked. "A yogurt!"

He rarely drank milk, so yogurt was even less common. As for eggs, they once raised chickens at home, but after Jiang Luoshan's back started hurting, they sold them.

"There are fruit pieces in it," Shubao emphasized. "Have some."

Jiang Shen was very happy. "Shubao-*ge*, you're so nice."

Shubao smiled back. "Wasn't I nice to you in the past?"

"You hit me quite a bit in the past," Jiang Shen replied honestly.

The other had no words.

★

Since school would only start in September, Shubao and Goumao were still enjoying their summer break. That evening, when Jiang Shen returned home, Tan Lingling opened up the container Li Zhuo had sent with him, and felt tears welling up as her eyes turned red, unable to say a word.

It was an entire, boiled spring chicken, ready to eat. Li Zhuo had even deboned it considerately, and left a note saying that no salt had been added.

An unprecedented occasion occurred that night. Jiang Shen had two chicken drumsticks, a luxury he had never enjoyed before, and he felt as though he was floating on air. After dinner, he returned to his room to press his toes, pondering over how he was going to ask Goumao if he could borrow his computer — Qingling-*zi* was learning how to draw, so the only ones who had a computer in the village were the siblings.

Jiang Shen pointed his feet, pressing down on his toes one by one. He was very distracted, thinking up one excuse after another, unable to come up with any that he was both satisfied with, and that would guarantee success. Sighing, he extended his legs to the sides in an effortless split. He bent forward, his upper body right against the floor, and rested his chin on the back of his hands.

Again, he sighed deeply.

Tan Lingling knocked on his door. “It’s time to shower. Try to sleep early.”

Agreeing obediently, he stood up. Tan Lingling was standing by his door carrying some clothes, and seeing him walk out, she shooed him to the bathroom. “Your father’s inside. Go in and scrub his back for him.”

It had been a while since Jiang Luoshan had showered with his son. Jiang Shen walked in with a towel, giggling at his father.

His father sat on a stool, turning his back towards Jiang Shen. “Did you get fairer?” he asked.

Jiang Shen looked at his own arms, wetting the towel then placing it over Jiang Luoshan’s shoulders. “I haven’t been out in the sun as much. Let me tell you, *Baba*, the girls in the dance studio are all really fair!”

“They *are* girls, after all.” The man turned towards his son and laughed. “Why would boys need to be so fair?”

Jiang Shen’s thoughts were very innocent. “Because it looks good! There’s a boy learning boxing next door, he’s also very fair, and he looks good!”

“You made a new friend?” Jiang Luoshan asked casually.

“We’ve only spoken a few times…” Jiang Shen thought about it. He used more pressure, massaging Jiang Luoshan’s waist. “Does that count as being friends?”

Sighing in content from the massage, his dad answered perfunctorily, his eyes half-lidded. “It does, of course it does… yeah, that spot. Use a little more strength.”

His dance classes were held every afternoon, but in the mornings, Jiang Shen still dared not sleep in; the first thing he did after waking up early was to clean the chicken coop. Fortunately, there was only Tony in it now, so only a very tiny amount of waste had to be cleared.

As a chicken, Tony’s daily routine was very healthy. It would crow at five in the morning, exercising its throat for an hour, then take a walk at six. Half an hour later, it would have breakfast, and at seven, it would already be waiting for Jiang Shen to join it, who would come into the yard to train at eight.

By the time Jiang Shen finished his two hours of basic training, his neighbor, Goumao, would finally be awake. Miao Hua’er had prepared breakfast for him. Having finished half of it, he held onto the other half, thinking that he would eat it later when he felt like it.

Shubao was waiting for him in his yard. Seeing how full Goumao’s hands were, he was speechless. “Can’t you finish your food before coming outside?”

Goumao was completely unconcerned. “Are you blind? There’s so much of it!”

Shubao, of course, was not blind, but he could not be bothered to respond.

The two of them went to find Jiang Shen together. Tony was by the gate of Jiang Shen’s place, so Goumao refused to go in, instead raising his voice and shouting, “Shen-*zi*!”

Jiang Shen called back in acknowledgement, and came out with an omelet in his mouth. He had actually already had breakfast, but was feeling hungry again after training. As such, he asked Tan Lingling to make him an omelet to satiate his belly.

Shubao waved at him. “That’s all you’re eating?”

Stepping out of the yard, Jiang Shen stopped the vigilant Tony from coming out with him. The chicken was clearly very unhappy, crowing loudly at Goumao.

“I had porridge in the morning too.” In front of Shubao, Jiang Shen was always quite well-behaved.

The other did not respond, only poking Goumao. “Give your eggs and milk to Shen-*zi*.”

Question marks appeared all over Goumao’s face. “But they’re for me?”

Shubao took them from Goumao’s hands directly instead, shoving them at Jiang Shen. “Weren’t you just complaining that there was too much? This is perfect, then. Shen-*zi* can help you finish some.”

Goumao was speechless.

Having received the eggs and milk, Jiang Shen did not know whether he should eat them or not. Goumao waved his hand, giving up. “Go ahead.”

“How about I give the eggs back?” Jiang Shen asked.

Goumao gnashed his teeth ferociously. “Just eat them when I tell you to!”

“Go ahead and eat,” Shubao said, “you’re growing right now.”

Goumao glared at him. “*I*’m growing, too.”

Shubao burst out laughing. “You should grow a brain first,” he said, with no courtesy.

The entertainment the village children had could be considered lacking, yet was still very plentiful. Despite that, there were still only a few choices, like searching for eggs in spring, fishing in summer, beating ears of rice in autumn, and playing in the snow in winter. No matter what, the children could make a game out of anything, and there were more than enough avenues for the children to have their wild fun.

Goumao’s family owned the village’s largest fishing grounds. His father, Chen Laoshi, had to go there early every morning, and by the time Goumao brought Shubao and Jiang Shen over, the fishing nets had nearly all been collected.

Qingling-*zi* sat by the pond, her feet bare, and she stood up when she saw Jiang Shen. “Shen-*zi*!”

Before Jiang Shen had time to respond, Goumao had already rushed over. “Qingling-*zi*, you better put your shoes on, or else!”

She pouted unhappily. “It’s so hot! Who wants to wear shoes?”

He continued being unreasonable. “You still have to wear them!”

Qingling-*zi* was about to die of annoyance from this unfortunate brother of hers, deeply loathing how he wanted to stick his nose into everything. Her little face darkened, and she sat right back down while he bent down, took her shoes, and forced them back onto her feet. Despite her struggling, she was unable to free herself from him.

“Stop moving.” Goumao held onto her ankle. “Don’t you know that girls can’t let their feet get cold?”

In a bad temper, she answered, “Are you my father? You’re so naggy.”

He put her shoes back on for her, then pulled her up. “Stay further away from the water.”

Shubao took on the role of a mediator. “Alright, enough. It’s rare for her to join us, just let her play.”

Goumao was not very happy. “She’s not your sister, of course you wouldn’t cherish her.”

“When have I not cherished her?” Shubao scolded laughingly. He looked at the little girl next to them. “Qingling-*zi*, want me to take you swimming?”

She blushed. Right as she was about to reply, she was shoved behind her brother’s back.

Goumao pointed at Shubao in warning. “No flirting! Shen Shubao! Don’t even think about taking advantage of my sister!”

In the end, Jiang Shen was left alone with Qingling-*zi*. They sat by the bank, the little girl staring resentfully at Goumao and Shubao, who were playing in the pond with their chests bare. The two boys had caught some sort of fish, shouting and

yelling as they chased after each other.

“Why aren’t you joining them?” Qingling-*zi* asked Jiang Shen hesitantly, pulling her eyes away from the boys in the pond.

Jiang Shen did want to play, but walking around the pond in bare feet could easily lead to an injury. He remembered what Miss Lin had said before, that he needed to ‘take care of his feet like they were his life’; after having received this edict, he practically wanted to copy it right onto his own forehead.

Like an old lady, Qingling-*zi* sighed, complaining as she wrinkled her nose. “Goumao is so annoying.”

“He’s alright…” Jiang Shen thought for a moment, then put in a good word for Goumao. “He gave me his eggs and milk just now.”

Qingling-*zi* laughed brightly. “You’re speaking on his behalf just because he gave you some food?” she teased. “Jiang Shen, why are you so easy to coax?”

Of course Jiang Shen didn’t think he was easy to coax, but he was also unable to refute her reasoning. In the end, he could only console himself with the thought that food was a necessity to all people.

Near noon, it became evident that Shubao and Goumao had yet to have enough of playing in the pond. Unable to wait any longer, Jiang Shen stood up and said to Qingling-*zi*, “I’m going back. Please tell your brother for me.”

Qingling-*zi* nodded, looking as though she understood everything. “You’re going to the Children’s Center to dance?”

Silent, Jiang Shen was in a fluster. “H-how did you know?” he stammered.

“My mom told me about it,” she said, as though it were obvious, then glanced at Jiang Shen with a smile. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

He was quite embarrassed. “That’s not…” Halfway through, he looked around, as though feeling guilty, then emphasized in a low voice, “You must not tell.”

Qingling-*zi* was about to die laughing. “I won’t, really! My brother’s a blockheaded fool, how would he ever understand?”

Jiang Shen ran through the fields. The rice plants were all growing beautifully, nearly reaching the height of an adult’s waist. Leaping across the ditch by the paddy fields, he spread his arm out, and the tips of the plants brushed gently against his palm.

Holding his shoes, Tan Lingling rode her bicycle down to the asphalt road to deliver them to him. From a distance, she shouted, “Run slower! Be careful you don’t trip!”

The summer sun was like wrinkled satin, spilling down and laying across the fragrant crops and fields.

A warm breeze blowing across the paddy fields combed through Jiang Shen’s fringe gently. Mouth spread into a grin, he extended both arms, and with a simple, basic step known as the chassé, he made his way over to Tan Lingling. At the end, he even did a little spin, then bowed.

Wordless, she threw his shoes at him. “Look at what a show-off you are.”

Jiang Shen laughed loudly, hanging his shoes around his neck. Just as he was about to run to the bus stop, Tan Lingling called him to a halt and handed him a lunchbox. “Take this.”

He accepted it. Upon shaking the box, he heard something rolling about inside. “What is it?”

“Just two eggs. Save them for when you need them.”

While Jiang Shen had hurried over to the dance studio, some of the girls had yet to arrive. Miss Lin was helping Song Xin stretch her legs, and she waved when she saw him. “You’re here!”

“I’m here.” Jiang Shen sat down right where he was standing and changed his shoes. He looked over at Song Xin; she was doing the splits with a rather unhappy expression, her chin in her hand as she looked at him listlessly.

“What’s wrong?” He moved to sit next to her.

“I’m annoyed. I had an argument with my parents.”

“What did you argue about?”

“I’ll be in my second year of junior high when school starts again, and I have to pay proper attention to school. I said that I wanted to dance, so they were unhappy.” She snorted. “As if *I*’m happy.” Then, she looked at Jiang Shen. “What grade will you be in?”

“I’ll be transferring into third grade.”

Song Xin sighed, a little envious. “Then you can still practice for three more years. How nice.”

“We can’t dance anymore in junior high?” He did not understand. “But you’re still dancing, and you’re so good at it.”

Song Xin laughed. She was only around twelve or thirteen, but her laugh made her sound like an adult.

“You don’t understand,” she said. After thinking about it though, she seemed to realize that she was unable to explain it clearly, so she could only feign maturity. “You’ll understand later on.”

There were many basic steps in ballet. While learning, Jiang Shen would record them in his notebook; he would spell any terms he did not know phonetically, then go back home to memorize them gradually. Miss Lin knew about this habit of his, so she would slow down when speaking, and most of the girls who were familiar with these steps would even help him review. Usually, halfway through the lesson, Jiang Shen would have exerted three or four times more energy than the others.

He perspired a lot. Putting aside how tired he was, boys his age got hungry often. So during the break, he sneaked outside, intending to finish off the eggs he brought.

While sitting in the corridor and peeling an egg, the door to the boxing gym across the hall opened.

Bai Jinyi walked out with a head full of messy hair, his body exuding heat.

Halfway through peeling, Jiang Shen looked up at Bai Jinyi with a slightly open mouth.

At a loss for words, Bai Jinyi started fixing his hair, greatly concerned with his appearance. He walked over and sat down next to Jiang Shen. “What are you eating?” he asked.

Jiang Shen continued peeling, smiling at him. “An egg.”

“Oh,” Bai Jinyi replied, watching him peel.

Slowly, Jiang Shen finished peeling his egg. For some reason, out of nowhere, he thought about how Jiang Luoshan had said that they could be counted as friends, and after a moment of hesitation, he asked politely, “Do you want one?”

Bai Jinyi raised a brow. He paused for a while, then said succinctly, “Yes.”

Silent and pained, Jiang Shen handed the egg to him.

Bai Jinyi finished it in two bites. After he was done, he wiped his mouth, and said a little judgmentally, “Why is it so small?”

With a scowl, Jiang Shen no longer wanted to speak to him, quietly hiding his other egg behind his back.

★

Jiang Shen really regretted giving away his egg, as by the time he was done with class at the end of the day, he was dizzy from hunger, and only water could be heard sloshing around loudly in his belly. Miss Lin could not help but laugh. “You’re that hungry?”

He still had to stay behind and clean up. Hearing that, he felt quite pitiful. “Yes.”

While chuckling, she took out some biscuits from her bag. “Here, have some, and ask Song Xin to help you mop the floor.”

Song Xin put on a very magnanimous expression. “I’ll do it,” she said generously.

Jiang Shen went to the corridor obediently to eat his biscuits. To avoid bumping into another robber like Bai Jinyi, he decided to sit by the backdoor of the boxing gym. Yet right as he was licking his fingers halfway through the biscuits, Lai Song somehow managed to discover him.

“Little Swan!” He waved at him. “What are you eating?”

Taken aback, Jiang Shen wondered if none of them were being fed enough. Why was this always the first thing they asked?

Lai Song was very friendly, and he walked out to sit down next to Jiang Shen. “Are those biscuits? They won’t fill you up.”

“They’re all I have…” Jiang Shen grumbled.

“Why didn’t you bring some eggs?”

“I did.” He sighed. “I gave one to Bai Jinyi.”

Eyes widening, Lai Song asked curiously, “Why did you give it to him?”

Jiang Shen frowned. “He asked for it.”

“He’s probably bullying you.” Lai Song laughed. “A guy who brings sliced beef every day tricking you for your egg? He can’t do that. I’ll have to scold him later.”

Hearing that, Jiang Shen didn’t feel that Bai Jinyi deserved to get scolded over an egg. “Forget it. He already ate it anyway.”

Lai Song looked at him, delighted. “You’re quite generous.” He thought for a moment, then continued, “You’re done, right? Want to watch Richie Rich Bai box?”

“I still have to clean the studio.”

“Isn’t there Song Xin?” Lai Song was completely unconcerned. He suddenly stood up, shouting at Song Xin in the studio. “Xinxin-*mei*! I’m taking Jiang Shen to our gym to play, so we’ll leave the mopping to you!”

Song Xin seemed to be a little scared of Lai Song, but could not stand being called ‘Xinxin-*mei*’. With her hands on her hips, she shouted back, “How many times have I told you?! You’re not allowed to call me Xinxin-*mei*!”

Lai Song disregarded her words. “I’ve already called you that for years. Why are you getting upset now?”

He then dragged Jiang Shen to the boxing gym. “Let’s go, Little Swan! We’ll go look at our Richie Rich Bai, and get him to pay you back for the egg with KFC later.”

The boxing class was nearing its end too, but Bai Jinyi was still up in the ring. Strangely, no one was training with him. The coach had tied a rope from one corner of the ring to the other, and was making him practice his footwork.

Jiang Shen did not really understand what he was looking at, only seeing Bai Jinyi crouch down swiftly before standing back up again. With his shoulder against the rope, he moved over to the right side of it, and the next time he crouched down and stood up again, he was on the left side. Just like that, he slowly made his way forward, and when he reached the corner of the ring, he returned in the same manner.

“This is the slip rope drill,” Lai Song explained. “Look at the movements of his legs — how he’s evading and attacking.” Lai Song demonstrated the same actions a couple of times. “Got it?”

A bit muddleheaded, Jiang Shen nodded. He watched for a little while more, then could not help but ask, “Isn’t there anyone training with him?”

Lai Song exclaimed with an exaggerated expression. “No one will train with him. When Richie Rich Bai enters the ring, it belongs to him alone, and no one wishes to stir up any trouble.” He pointed at the ring. “Just look. Does he seem like he’s

fighting anyone?”

Jiang Shen was genuinely unable to imagine how Bai Jinyi would look when boxing with someone else… or rather, he could not imagine how he would look getting beaten up.

In Jiang Shen’s eyes, the other was someone who was born above the rest. Putting aside the thought of a fist landing on that pretty face, Bai Jinyi didn’t even seem to know how to bow his head; his chin was always raised up high, and his back was always straight. There was an ever-present look of haughtiness on his face, arrogance filling his eyes.

Jiang Shen perhaps didn’t even realize that among his feelings of confusion and muddle-headedness, there was also a trace of jealousy.

And just like everyone else that was looking at Bai Jinyi, even his tiny bit of envy became insignificant.

Lai Song looked down at Jiang Shen’s feet, then suddenly asked, “Isn’t it time for you to get a new pair of ballet shoes?”

Reflexively, the latter looked down as well, discovering that a seam near his toes on one of his shoes had already split. With a red face, he tucked that shoe behind his other leg in embarrassment.

Lai Song had no intention of laughing at him. “Where are the shoes you normally wear? I’ll help you get them.”

Done with his drills, Bai Jinyi left the ring. While drinking water, he wiped his sweat away as his coach spoke to him. Many of the students surrounding the ring were all looking rather unreconciled, and were all trying to listen in no matter how far they stood. Not minding the rest of them, Bai Jinyi was expressionless, and he only raised a thick brow out of habit when he turned and saw Jiang Shen.

“Little Swan,” he called out to Jiang Shen, “come here.”

Reluctantly, Jiang Shen walked over.

“What’s that in your hand?” Bai Jinyi asked.

“Biscuits.”

“You’ve finished them?”

Jiang Shen nodded.

The other shot him a frown. “What are you unhappy about?”

Jiang Shen blinked, then mumbled, “I’m not unhappy…”

Bai Jinyi snorted. “Stand here and don’t move.”

So Jiang Shen really did not dare to move. He watched helplessly as Bai Jinyi turned back to pack his belongings. A little bit later, Lai Song returned with Jiang Shen's regular shoes, even bringing him his bag.

"You're done?" With no sense of awkwardness, Lai Song waved at Bai Jinyi. "Little Swan, change into your shoes and let's go get something to eat."

Jiang Shen was clearly not short, but when standing between these two fellows who believed that they could speak the hard truth with their fists alone, he somehow ended up looking a lot more delicate and frail.

Lai Song was not courteous to Bai Jinyi at all. "Did you know that Little Swan almost starved to death today? Why did you eat his egg? What about your beef?"

Bai Jinyi pursed his lips. "I finished it by noon already." He glanced up at Jiang Shen. "You're hungry?"

Right when Jiang Shen was about to say no, the half pack of biscuits in his stomach unfortunately disagreed, its grumbling embarrassing him deeply.

Bai Jinyi narrowed his eyes, his tone rather impolite. "Why didn't you say so? Why did you give your egg to me then?"

"You looked like you wanted it…" Jiang Shen answered falteringly.

The other was unhappy. "I'm not *that* greedy."

"Are you guys done? I'm starving," Lai Song interrupted.

Bai Jinyi shot him a look, then turned towards Jiang Shen. "What do you want to eat?"

Before Jiang Shen could even open his mouth, Lai Song leaned into his ear. With a volume that anyone could hear, he said sternly, "K! F! C!"

Jiang Shen was speechless.

One KFC meal was nothing to Bai Jinyi. He ordered fifteen pieces of original fried chicken, two boxes of chicken nuggets, four sets of chicken wings, and even an additional burger for Lai Song.

Lai Song was clearly used to this. Without another word, he sat down and dug in.

To Jiang Shen, however, the amount of food was shocking. He stared at the mountain-like pile of chicken with absolutely no idea where to start.

Bai Jinyi and Lai Song swiftly ripped off the oily, fried skin from the chicken. While licking his fingers, Lai Song asked Jiang Shen, "Why are you not eating?"

"A… are we going to be able to finish all this?" Jiang Shen could not help but re-confirm.

"Just eat as much as you can," Bai Jinyi responded. "Lai Song will finish the rest."

With extreme pride, Lai Song stuck both his thumbs up, pointing them at himself. "Lai Song Garbage Disposal, at your service!"

Bai Jinyi ignored him, continuing to peel off the chicken skin with his head bowed.

Jiang Shen watched for a little while, somewhat unable to accept what he was seeing. “This is so wasteful…”

Impatiently, Bai Jinyi shoved some skinned chicken into Jiang Shen’s mouth.“Eat,” he commanded.

Jiang Shen had no choice but to start chewing.

Lai Song and Bai Jinyi were like two bulldozers, their speed at demolishing the pile of chicken astonishing. Especially Lai Song, who finished five pieces of fried chicken almost in the blink of an eye. Then, he removed the buns of the burger, carefully scraping away the mayonnaise on top of the patty.

“Little Swan.” Lai Song flung the sauce covered cabbage leaves to the side. He seemed to have thought of something, and asked Jiang Shen, “What do you do for fun in your village?”

Jiang Shen thought about it. “In the summer, we go fishing or chase after ducks. In the fields, we dig for earthworms and catch beetles or cicadas.”

“That's it?”

“You want to go?” Bai Jinyi interrupted.

Eating the chicken from the burger, Lai Song responded, “I’m only curious. Look, Little Swan doesn’t even have a cellphone.”

Bai Jinyi looked at Jiang Shen, who was a little embarrassed. “I don't need one.”

“Is the village as fun as having a phone?” Lai Song asked.

“I think it's pretty fun,” Jiang Shen answered honestly.

This time, Bai Jinyi looked toward Jiang Shen. “How so?”

“Umm…” Jiang Shen slowly shredded his chicken, thinking about how to explain. “When spring arrived, we went to look for eggs. Gou— Chen Maoxiu, my neighbor, stole eggs from a hen’s nest, then got chased by a big, wild rooster that kept pecking him. Then we took it home after.”

“To eat?” Lai Song questioned, murdering the atmosphere.

“No.” Jiang Shen shook his head. “We’re raising it at home. Its name is Tony.”

“*Toh-nee*,” Bai Jinyi corrected. “Your pronunciation is wrong. Try again.”

Jiang Shen imitated the shape of Bai Jinyi’s lips obediently and repeated Tony’s name.

Lai Song ended up focusing on something a little off topic. “You guys raise chickens as pets? Not cats or dogs?”

“We raise them all.” Jiang Shen’s mouth curved into a smile. “The dogs belong to everyone. The cats, too. They’re allowed to run around anywhere. Some people even raise really big swans at home, to watch the doors. Those swans are really fierce.”

“You’re not fierce at all, though,” Bai Jinyi said suddenly.

“Ah?” For a while, Jiang Shen didn't understand what he was talking about.

The other tilted his head at him, smiling unexpectedly. “That’s why you’re a *little* swan.”

★

Jiang Shen had already told them his name many times before, but both Bai Jinyi and Lai Song seemed to prefer calling him ‘Little Swan’. As he was unable to change their form of address, he gave up and allowed them to call him that. After all, in the village, people were also often addressed by their nicknames — didn't he always call Chen Maoxiu ‘Goumao’?

After the KFC meal, Jiang Shen had to take the bus home as usual. Bai Jinyi and Lai Song accompanied him to the station. These city children never seemed to have taken any long distance buses; along the way, Lai Song had countless questions, and his interest was so great that he nearly followed Jiang Shen up onto the bus.

Jiang Shen found a seat by the window. Standing under the window outside the bus, Bai Jinyi raised his chin, looking up at him.

“Your ballet shoes!” Bai Jinyi mouthed at him. “It’s time to get new ones!”

Jiang Shen could not understand what he was trying to say. “What?!”

Standing on his tiptoes, Bai Jinyi pointed at his own shoes.

Jiang Shen finally got it.

The bus was about to leave. Jiang Shen had no time to respond, and could only wave at Bai Jinyi. With his forehead pressed against the glass, he stared at the station as the bus drove away. Bai Jinyi did not move from where he was standing; his back was very straight, his eyes slightly narrowed, and he looked rather imposing.

Seeing that her son was not eating much for dinner, Tan Lingling felt puzzled. “What’s wrong? You’re not hungry?”

Jiang Shen could only come clean. “I ate after class.”

“What did you eat?”

“A friend took me to KFC.”

Tan Lingling's eyes widened in surprise. She looked at Jiang Luoshan, who naturally got the hint. “Who’s the friend?” he asked.

“Bai Jinyi, from the boxing gym next door.” Jiang Shen finally decided to peel an egg and eat it. “I’ve told you about him before.”

In bits and pieces, Jiang Luoshan finally recalled the conversation he had with his son a few nights ago, when Jiang Shen was scrubbing his back. “The two of you are actually that close?”

Jiang Shen’s mouth was full of yolk. “He took one of my eggs, so he paid me back with KFC.”

Tan Lingling laughed. “How can your egg compare to KFC? You’ve taken great advantage of him.”

Jiang Shen frowned. Although he was young, he knew that it was not good to take advantage of others, and now he felt like he had done something bad. “Then what should I do?”

She tidied up the table, running a finger down her son’s nose. “You’ll have to pay back the debt yourself. Come up with something.”

There was only half a month left before school started for Goumao and Shubao. During this last stretch of freedom, however, the most important thing Goumao had to do was complete his holiday homework. Fortunately, they had the ever-reliable Shubao. Unfortunately for Goumao, the other boy seemed to have the spirit of a robber. If Goumao wanted to copy his homework, he needed to trade something for it.

“Don’t even think about using things like milk to bribe me this time.” Shen Shubao sat cross-legged in his yard. Surrounding him were boys from the village that were around their age; it looked as though he was holding court. “We have so much milk at home, we can’t even finish it!”

Qingling-*zi* and Jiang Shen were the only two children who didn't need to worry about holiday homework. Seeing how spineless her brother was, Qingling-*zi* was very exasperated.

“Look at how he practically wants to lick Shubao’s shoes,” she grumbled quietly to Jiang Shen. “Useless.”

He looked carefully at the scene. “No, that won’t happen. Shubao is very concerned about cleanliness, he wouldn’t like his shoes to be dirtied by spit.”

Qingling-*zi* was speechless. Unable to take it, she grabbed a bunch of foxtail grass and threw it at him. “Why are you so silly?”

Question marks appeared all over Jiang Shen’s face.

Shubao looked over in their direction. “No fighting! Qingling-*zi*, don’t hit him so hard.”

“I didn’t do anything,” she protested, then grumbled, “Shubao-*ge* is doting on you a little too much, isn’t he?”

“Just a few days ago, he kicked my butt because I stepped on the strawberries he was growing,” Jiang Shen answered.

She burst out laughing. “But he still dotes on you! I saw that he’s been giving you milk the past few days. Did your family start ordering milk?”

He nodded. “We did. They started delivering the milk to us last week.”

“You get two glasses of milk a day, lucky you.”

Jiang Shen hesitated. “Say… if I were to give a glass of milk to my friend, would they be happy?”

“It’ll depend on who your friend is.” Qingling-*zi* sat down on the ground, stretching her legs out. With an unconcerned tone, she said, “If they have milk to drink every day, why would they want yours?” She paused, then continued curiously, “Who do you want to give it to?”

“No one in particular…” he mumbled.

Twirling her braid, Qingling-*zi* spoke gleefully, with extreme narcissism, “I don’t want any milk, al-*riiight?*”

The emotional stress caused by a single KFC meal was even more deadly than Jiang Shen had thought. He had never been so anxious about anything before in his entire life, and almost all the grass in the village fields had been flattened by his pacing. All day long, he kept wondering what he could give to repay the kindness of Bai Jinyi treating him to KFC.

In the village, there was someone else feeling just as anxious as him, and that was Goumao.

In Chen Maoxiu’s words, it was getting harder and harder to wait upon Shen Shubao.

Shen Shubao’s family had some fields, but since both his parents worked elsewhere, all they grew in those fields were fruit. Luckily, the fields were not big, and were enough to provide for their family. A while ago, on impulse, Shubao had planted a small field of strawberries. Goumao volunteered to help him water, fertilize, and weed the field, and every day, after he was done, Shubao would let him copy a few pages of his math homework.

“He’s just like a greedy landlord!” Guomao complained while weeding the strawberry field. “I’ve exhausted myself the entire day working on his field, yet he refuses to let me copy any more! I still have to trade in something else to copy his English homework! Why is he so mean?!”

Jiang Shen did not need to work. He had been instructed by Shubao to supervise, making sure that Goumao was not lazing around.

“He’s not too bad.” Jiang Shen's expression was rather serious. “Over there. There are still some more weeds.”

Goumao was speechless. Tossing the hoe to the ground, he exclaimed, “Why do you listen to him?!”

“Because he’ll beat me up,” Jiang Shen answered prudently.

Goumao waved his fist in the air. “I can beat you up too!”

Jiang Shen pursed his lips. “Then I can tell on you to Shubao-*ge*, and ask him not to let you copy his homework.”

Wordless, Goumao had no choice but to grit his teeth and pick the hoe back up.

Strawberry seedlings planted in late August would bear fruit about three to five months later. The children in the village all loved to eat them, the girls especially. Although the strawberries were planted in Shubao's field, due to the principles of sharing, Goumao and Jiang Shen would both get their portion. As such, despite how lackadaisical the boys usually were, they all believed that everyone had a responsibility towards putting in the effort for something tasty.

Carefully, Goumao studied the seedlings for a long time. After clearing away the weeds that had been creeping in too closely, he even examined the young, growing leaves for the presence of bugs and worms.

The buds of the strawberries were not very pretty. Three leaves grew on a new stem, and a bud would slowly appear along with the fourth leaf. As such, when Goumao counted a third leaf, he became very excited, and called out loudly for Jiang Shen to come look.

"Look at this." Goumao pointed at the crown of the plant. "The third leaf is here! A little while later, when the fourth leaf comes, the bud will grow, too."

Stretching his neck out, Jiang Shen looked at the tiny, green leaves of the plant. They looked just like sprouts, so delicate and frail.

"How cute," Goumao exclaimed. At times like these, he truly looked like a child of the fields, born and bred there. "This year, the harvest is definitely going to be great!" Scratching his nose, he continued, "The rice plants have all grown very tall."

Jiang Shen's family made a living growing rice in the paddy fields, and the word 'harvest' had everything to do with their family's financial situation. Hearing what Goumao said, even if Jiang Shen did not understand the details, he was still delighted.

"It'll be great if the harvest is good." Jiang Shen crouched down by the tiny strawberry seedlings, resting his chin on his knees. "Then, we'll have money for me to go to school and other classes."

Goumao did not say anything. He knew Jiang Shen would be attending school with them this year. Perhaps to others, starting school was no big deal. To the Jiang family, though, Jiang Shen's school supplies alone would be a big expense for them.

"Why don't you harvest the rice first, then go to school?" Goumao asked. "With your father's back, can he even harvest the rice by himself?"

Jiang Shen was a little down. "I don't know." He really wanted to help his father out, but his parents no longer allowed him to do the heavier field chores. Miss Lin wanted him to protect his joints, back, and hips, and tasks like harvesting rice could easily cause injury.

Goumao did not know about him dancing, so he clearly did not understand what Jiang Shen was worried about.

"Don't think about it anymore." Goumao stood up, holding his hand out to Jiang Shen. "When there's a will, there's a way. Just think about November, when we'll have strawberries to eat."

Speaking of strawberries, Jiang Shen's mood immediately bounced back. He thought about it, then suddenly asked, "Are people in the city able to buy strawberries as good as ours?"

Goumao was a little uncertain. "I don't know… we've always been eating what we grow ourselves. Who would buy city strawberries?"

"I want to give them to someone, but he might have eaten better ones before."

Goumao clicked his tongue. "Come on, let's go ask Shubao."

"Strawberries?" Shubao was helping Qingling-*zi* mix her paints. The little girl had put up her easel by the fields, holding up her pencil, sketching something.

Shubao was mixing two colors together, and he answered distractedly. "All sorts of fruits can be bought from the supermarkets in the city, but as for how good they are, I've never tried them before. We can only go and look around ourselves."

"Are they as big as ours?" Jiang Shen asked urgently.

Shubao laughed. "Since ours are grown naturally, they'll definitely be smaller."

Sighing, Jiang Shen mumbled, "Then what's so good about ours…"

Goumao refused to concede. "They're sweeter!"

"Are they?" Jiang Shen was doubtful. "You've never even tried those big ones before."

Goumao and Shubao did not speak anymore, exchanging a look.

"What's going on with you?" Shubao could not help but ask Jiang Shen. "Just now, I even heard Qingling-*zi* say that you want to give your milk to someone…?"

"A friend from the city." Jiang Shen kicked at the tiny pebbles by his feet. He sneaked a peek at Goumao; Chen Maoxiu looked baffled.

"Why are you looking at me?" Goumao lifted Jiang Shen's head up. "Tell us."

Jiang Shen sighed again, still feeling rather embarrassed. "I gave him an egg, which ended with him taking me to KFC."

Shubao raised his voice. "You managed to trick your way to a KFC meal with only an egg?!"

"I didn't trick anyone, he insisted on taking me…" Jiang Shen rushed to explain, but thinking about it, it didn't seem like Bai Jinyi had 'insisted', either. As a result, he felt even more sheepish…

"Then how much did you eat?" Guomao could only ask.

Jiang Shen counted on his fingers. "They ordered fifteen pieces of fried chicken, two boxes of chicken nuggets, eight chicken wings, and a burger…"

After stating all that, he immediately clarified, "I didn't eat the burger."

“…Are you guys pigs?” Shubao paused. “No… that friend of yours… he’s really rich, isn’t he?”

“I didn’t eat that much, they were the ones eating a lot…” Jiang Shen said feebly.

Goumao was clearly still calculating how much everything had to have cost, and was feeling rather stunned.

“Idiot, stop calculating.” Shubao smacked Goumao’s hand. “Let’s go with Jiang Shen to the city, and see what we can buy to pay that guy back.”

“Hah! Pay him back?!” Guomao exclaimed. “Our Shen-*zi* probably hasn’t even seen a 100RMB note before!”

Jiang Shen was at a loss for words.

★

The bus from the village to the city only came once every forty minutes, and it was a two-hour journey, given that traffic was good. Normally, Jiang Shen and Tan Lingling always went to the city bright and early in the morning, though they didn't go to many places. They would only go shopping during festivals or holidays.

Shubao and Goumao had a few more years of life experience than he did, so they'd obviously walked down more paths. Jiang Shen didn't recognize a single place they dragged him to.

“Stop being timid.” Goumao smacked him on the back. “It’s not like we didn’t bring money.”

Jiang Shen was aggrieved. “I didn’t bring a lot.”

“What are you afraid of? Shubao’s here.”

Shubao turned back to look at them. “What are you guys saying about me?”

“Didn’t we agree to go to the mall? Why did we come to Sam’s Club?!” Goumao immediately shot back.

“Could we even afford anything at the mall?” Shubao asked, very practical. “Sam’s Club isn’t cheap either, you know.”

There was only one Sam’s Club in the city, and membership was required for entry. Among them, only Shubao had a membership card, which, of course, belonged to Li Zhuo. The three children were like headless flies, not knowing what to buy. Children their age were the most practical, and in that regard, nothing could compare to food.

The imported goods section in the supermarket took up quite a bit of space. Both Goumao and Jiang Shen crouched down in front of a shelf, staring at the rows of chocolate, unable to drag their eyes away.

Shubao walked around and came back, only to discover that they were still crouching there. He was at a loss for words. “Get a box, then,” he ended up saying.

They simultaneously swung their heads towards him, eyes like lasers homing in on his face.

Sighing, he squatted down with them. “Which one do you guys want?”

Jiang Shen and Goumao pointed at the same time. The comparison between their picks was rather brutal.

It had to be said that Jiang Shen was one of the rare mature children around. He was pointing at the cheapest option — a small box of Dove chocolate — while Goumao had no reservations at all, looking as though he was already about to throw a box of Ferrero Rochers into the cart.

Speechless, Shen Shubao gnashed his teeth. “Buy those yourself, Goumao!”

Goumao was horrified. “You’re biased!”

“It’s not like you don’t have money!” the other shot back.

Once the conversation turned to money, Goumao’s voice decreased in volume. After shifting about awkwardly for a moment, he finally said slowly, “I was going to lend Shen-*zi* the money…”

Jiang Shen watched them with his mouth half-opened, not understanding why they were bringing him up — when he made the connection though, he was very moved. Eyes brimming with emotions, he looked at Goumao and called out, “Goumao-*ge*…”

The other boy’s expression was very complicated as well. After struggling for a while, he could not stop himself. “Since you’re calling me *ge*, could you not use that nickname anymore?”

After contemplating for a long time, Jiang Shen finally decided to buy Bai Jinyi a box of chocolates. With his current savings, he could only give him a box of Dove, but it was the thought that mattered. Jiang Shen could just give him a few more presents in the future.

The three boys also made a trip to the fruit section just to look at the strawberries. Huddling closely, they carefully surveyed the strawberry display; as expected, the strawberries there were bigger than the ones they grew themselves. “Should we buy some for you to try?” Goumao egged Jiang Shen on.

The latter pursed his lips. “They’re so expensive…”

Goumao encouraged, “I’ll buy them for you.”

Selecting a box, he got Shubao to hold onto it before turning back and selecting others. Even though Jiang Shen had a hankering for strawberries, he did not have the extra money to buy them. His conscience also did not allow him to unabashedly eat the ones Goumao was going to buy, so he decided to go to some other shelves and see if there was anything else he could afford.

After choosing the fruits they wanted, Shubao and Goumao were alarmed when they realized Jiang Shen was not behind them. Fortunately, this little brother of theirs had not wandered off too far — Shubao found him at the shoe section.

Crouching in front of the shelves, Jiang Shen had two pairs of ballet shoes in his hands, and he seemed to be comparing them. It was rare to see the little boy looking so solemn, his dilemma leaving deep creases in his brows. On reflex, Goumao called out, “Shen—”

Shubao tugged at him. “How much money do you still have left?” he suddenly asked.

Goumao was baffled. “Why?”

The other raised his chin. “We’re buying him a pair of ballet shoes.”

Question marks appeared all over Goumao’s face, and he was completely lost. “Why are we getting him ballet shoes? Is he going to farm in them?”

“Do you still want to copy my homework?” Shubao threatened, his expression icy.

Goumao was speechless.

“Also, don’t let him find out that we bought them for him on purpose.”

“Are you crazy?!” Goumao was about to yank all his hair out. “What are we going to say?! That we stole them?!”

Shubao thought it over. “Just say that you bought it by accident.”

Goumao finally understood the situation. “So I’m going to end up looking like I'm crazy?!”

In the end, Jiang Shen could not bear to buy either pair of shoes. After calculating the amount of money he had left after the chocolates, he was quite preoccupied with his worries, not at all noticing what his two older brothers had bought while paying the bill.

On the bus home, Goumao unwrapped the box of Ferrero Rochers. While handing one to Jiang Shen, he suddenly exclaimed, with extreme exaggeration, “Ohhh, nooo! I bought the wrong thing!”

Playing along, Shubao leaned over to look. “What is it?”

From his bag, Goumao pulled out a pair of ballet shoes. “How did I end up buying these?!” he exclaimed, his tone slightly off.

At a loss for words, Shubao obviously could not accept Goumao’s overdone acting. He reached over and pinched Goumao painfully on the waist, causing him to nearly yelp in pain. Turning around, Goumao shot him a glare, then toned his expression down unwillingly.

Right now, the most flustered one out of the three was actually Jiang Shen. He really did not know how the ballet shoes he wanted had ended up in Goumao’s bag. Uncertain, he looked down at the shoes in his hand, flipping them around. When he looked back up at his friends again, confusion and delight were evident on his face.

Goumao’s face heated up from Jiang Shen’s attention. Coughing, he deliberately pointed out, “The supermarket doesn’t do refunds. These shoes are useless to me, so I think I’ll have to throw them away.”

Jiang Shen held them tightly, not letting go. “I-I… how about giving them to me? I have a use for them,” he said, rather eagerly.

“What use would that be?” Goumao asked deliberately.

Jiang Shen could not give him a reason, Getting so anxious, he broke out in a sweat. Suddenly, he seemed to recall something, and pulled out what money he had left from his pocket, shoving it insistently into Goumao’s hands. “Consider it purchased! I’ll give you all this for now, and pay you back in the future.”

“What are you doing?” Goumao frowned, pushing the money back a little unhappily. “I’ll just give them to you. Why would I take your money? Are you looking down on me?”

Clumsy with words, Jiang Shen racked his brains, thinking of what to say. “No, I…”

“Enough.” Shubao laughed, putting an end to this farce. “The shoes are useless to us. If you want them, just take them. As for why you want them…”

He paused, reaching up to ruffle Jiang Shen’s hair somewhat forcefully. “We’ll just give them to you, and not ask.”

When Chen Maoxiu got home, Chen Qingling happened to be painting the sketch she had drawn in the afternoon. Seeing her brother come in, she could not be bothered to greet him, instead acting like she did not see him and continued to dab at her canvas.

Goumao took the box of strawberries out. He washed them, removed their tops, placed them in a bowl, then set the bowl next to Qingling-*zi*’s hand. “Do you want any?” he asked, putting on a fierce voice on purpose.

One second later, she finally deigned to put a strawberry in her mouth. “You went out to buy them?”

He ate one himself. “We went to Sam’s Club.”

She could not help but roll her eyes, grumbling, “Why didn’t you bring me along…”

Goumao jerked his chin at her canvas. “Don’t you have homework to do?”

Pursing her lips, she did not continue to protest, and carefully painted the rice paddy fields green. He stood by the side, watching, before he suddenly said, “I bought Shen-*zi* a pair of ballet shoes.”

“Eh?” She was shocked. “You know too?”

Goumao narrowed his eyes, then a rare moment of intelligence shone through him. “What do *you* know?”

“That he’s learning ballet!” Qingling-*zi* did not suspect a thing, a look of yearning on the little girl’s face. “I’ve gone to the Children’s Center and seen him there a couple of times. He’s very hardworking! Whenever he stretches his legs, it looks really painful to me, but he doesn’t make any sounds at all! He also looks great when he’s dancing.”

Like a little adult, she sighed, tossing her brush aside. “If I didn’t have art lessons, I’d want to learn ballet too.”

“Hah, as if. Just look at how pampered and spoiled you are. You think you’ll be able to take the pain?”

His words were quite direct, leaving her speechless.

Carrying the bowl of strawberries, Goumao was about to leave the house, but turned back after two steps to tell her, “Don’t tell Shen-*zi* that I know about his dancing lessons. The little fool’s too easily embarrassed.”

Outside the yard, Shen Shubao had a basket of eggs, about to deliver them to the Jiang family. He happened to bump into Chen Maoxiu, who had just left his house, and the two froze upon seeing each other.

“Where are you going?” Shubao was the first to ask.

Pressing his lips together, Goumao answered, “I’m bringing Shen-*zi* some strawberries.” He then eyed the basket. “How many eggs are in there?”

Shubao looked down, smiling. “Around sixty? Enough to last Shen-*zi* a month.”

Goumao nodded. “It’s my turn next time.”

The other raised a brow. With tacit understanding, neither boy exposed what they knew.

Halfway to Jiang Shen’s place, Goumao could not help but ask, “When did you find out?”

Shubao calculated it. “A few months earlier than you.”

Goumao was a little jealous. “That little punk told you himself?”

“How could he have?” Shubao burst out laughing. “It’s not as if you don’t know Shen-*zi*’s personality. He’s unwilling to be treated differently, or trouble others. Whenever he suffers grievances or hardships, he’ll never say a word. He’d never tell anyone about something like this.”

Goumao did not respond to that. Kicking at a chunk of dirt as he walked, he mumbled gloomily, “I’ll save my breakfast milk for him from now on.”

“There’s no need for yours. I’ve already given him mine, and it’s enough for him to drink two glasses a day,” Shubao said, a little scornful, “if he drinks more than that, he won’t be able to digest it.”

“Why are *you* the only good guy here? You’ve been one for so long already, making me look as though I’m bullying him in comparison,” the other said, unhappy.

Shubao laughed wickedly. “That’s why I let you buy the shoes.”

Tan Lingling knew that her son had gone to Sam’s Club, so she was not surprised to see the box of Dove chocolates on the table. This was the first time in Jiang Shen’s life that he had gone to the city with his friends, and his face was flushed with excitement. Upon changing into his new ballet shoes, he practiced a few basic steps

in his room.

Tan Lingling could not help but tease him. “Look at how pleased you are with yourself.”

A little embarrassed, he took off the shoes, examining them like they were a great treasure. He could not bear to throw away his old pair either, and planned on using them to practice at home.

“Goumao bought them,” he confessed to his mother. “He refused to accept my money…”

After a beat, Tan Lingling suggested, “How about giving him something else in return?”

“What could I give him…?” Jiang Shen pondered deeply for a long time. Finally, he cheered up immensely. “I know! I can help him copy homework!”

She was not sure if she should laugh or scold him. “…That’s not a good thing to do.”

Jiang Shen did not care if it was good or not, only thinking that it was a great idea. When Goumao and Shubao arrived with their stuff, he announced in a very earnest, conscientious manner, “Shubao-*ge*, please give me your homework. I’ll help Goumao copy it!”

Having never allowed anyone to exploit him, Shen Shubao never would've thought that the first time he got taken advantage of, and the first time Chen Maoxiu got the advantage, would both be bestowed by Jiang Shen.

Still, it did not matter who had the advantage. Everything was fiery and warm, burning into the very bottom of one’s heart.

Chapter 4 — My Brother

The harvest season of September and October was beginning. However, before the harvesting actually started, it was time for the wild puppies of the fields to settle down. Rushing through the night, Jiang Shen helped Goumao copy the rest of his holiday homework. By the next morning, he was practically dozing off as he got onto the bus. Shubao had sneaked a bottle of milk into his bag while Chen Maoxiu, unwilling to be outdone, had also placed two eggs inside.

As Chen Qingling watched them, her frown became more apparent, and she forced Jiang Shen to wake up.

Rubbing his eyes, Jiang Shen gazed at the girl blearily. She took out a White Rabbit candy from her pocket and asked him, “Do you want one?”

Jiang Shen nodded, happily accepting the candy. “Qingling-*zi*, you’re so nice,” he said, extremely touched.

She gave him a beautiful smile, then looked gloatingly towards Shubao and Goumao. The two older boys were jealous, but they could not expose themselves. They both rolled their eyes, and Goumao even added a disdainful huff.

After eating the candy, Jiang Shen put the wrapper away carefully. He helped Qingling-*zi* hold her bag, and leaning into his seat, he gradually fell asleep again.

Jiang Shen was transferring right into third grade, and it was a new environment for him. However, children around the ages of eight or nine were much more adaptable than adults. Jiang Shen was tall, so he was assigned to sit at the back of the class. Qingling-*zi* turned around from her seat in front, making faces at him.

Nothing very interesting happened during the first day of class. Likely because he was used to the freedom in the village, Jiang Shen was somewhat unable to remain seated properly for the forty minutes that each class lasted. When it was nearly lunchtime, he could not help but drift off, his eyes gazing towards the windows. Perhaps because it was the first day of school, the marching band was practicing on the sports field. He couldn’t tell what song they were playing, but the rhythm was pleasant, and he started counting the beats silently while resting his chin in his hand. His feet became restless under his desk, swinging and tapping to the rhythm.

The marching band started playing ‘Full of Joy’, and he followed along, tapping his feet to the beat. Perhaps he was too engrossed in the music; he did not realize how loud his tapping had become. Even the teacher paused, taking a look at him.

Qingling-*zi* called out to him quietly. “Shen-*zi*! Shen-… *Jiang Shen!”*

With a bang, he kicked his desk, scaring himself. In a fluster, he hurriedly grabbed at his books before they fell to the floor.

Qingling-*zi* was speechless, while the teacher only laughed. “Even in class, you can’t help but dance, huh?”

Jiang Shen blushed a bright red. He sat there timidly, not knowing how to explain himself.

The teacher waved him off. “Alright, alright. Remember to pay attention.”

Finally, Jiang Shen managed to pull through until noon, where Qingling-*zi* brought him to the cafeteria to buy food. As the cafeteria catered to both the primary school and junior high, it was very big.

While in line, Jiang Shen heard Goumao shout his name from a distance away. Turning towards the sound, he saw Shubao waving at him. "Come sit here after you buy your food!"

"Okay!" Jiang Shen called back.

Goumao had already bought Qingling-*zi*'s meal for her. When Jiang Shen finally managed to make his way through the crowd, the other three were already half done. Chen Maoxiu glanced at Jiang Shen's bowl; on it was stir fried peppers with shredded meat and stir-fried tomatoes and eggs. There was quite a lot of rice, but only those two dishes.

Biting on her chopsticks, Qingling-*zi* blinked at him. "You didn't get more meat?"

"It's too expensive…" Jiang Shen mumbled. "Eggs are the same, anyway."

Shen Shubao did not say anything, taking a chicken drumstick from his bowl and placing it on top of Jiang Shen's rice. "I ordered too much, help me finish it."

Jiang Shen's eyes went round. "Wow, a drumstick!"

"What about it? It's not as though we've never had them before," Shubao said disdainfully, pointing at the bones in his bowl. "See? I've already finished one."

Jiang Shen frowned. He picked at the meat with his chopsticks, then looked back up at Shubao. "I'll wash your bowl for you, Shubao-*ge*."

Right as he finished speaking, Goumao gave him a pork rib. "Help me wash my bowl too, then!"

Jiang Shen was stunned.

★

Leaning by the sink, Qingling-*zi* licked the lid of her yogurt as she reproached Jiang Shen. "Say, aren't you just making life hard for yourself? If they give you something to eat, just take it. What are you being polite for?" She then opened another bottle of yogurt, handing it to him. "Here."

He smiled. "Where's your bowl?"

"Goumao washed it already," she replied matter-of-factly.

Sighing, Jiang Shen said, "Your brother is so good to you."

"Ewww…" She pressed her lips into a thin line, shuddering. "Don't lump me with that weirdo. Gross."

He expressed a smidge of disapproval. "How can you talk about your brother like that?"

“You don’t know anything,” she said unhappily, “when Chen Maoxiu started junior high, he began hanging out with hooligans. This isn’t one of the top junior highs, so there are all sorts of people here. There’s been a few times where I’ve caught him skipping class to go karaoke. I despise him!” she ended a bit savagely, wrinkling her nose.

“Goumao isn’t like that,” he said, not believing her. “He’s just a bit playful.”

Qingling-*zi* snorted. She bit at the straw of her yogurt, grumbling, “If you don’t believe me, nevermind… you’ll understand if you see it for yourself.”

Once afternoon classes were over, Jiang Shen was in a hurry to rush to the dance studio. Qingling-*zi* chased him down the corridor, insistently shoving a yogurt into his bag.

“Drink it when you get hungry.” Seemingly afraid that he would refuse it, she then emphasized, “This is Goumao’s. He’s lactose intolerant, so he can’t drink it!”

Wordless, Jiang Shen wondered what ‘lactose intolerant’ meant. When did she learn such a hip phrase?

As the campus consisted of both the primary school and junior high, its grounds were huge. He had to cross the entire sports field before he could reach the school gates. The junior high students would be dismissed a little later, meaning Shen Shubao was still at school. With his foot on a soccer ball, he cupped his mouth with his hands and shouted, “Shen-*zi*! Don’t run too fast!”

While running, Jiang Shen waved back. He had no time to speak, continuing to run with the wind, the school bag on his shoulder bumping along on his back. He ran across the track and through a pavilion, a purple wisteria blossom landing on his shoulder.

The guard standing by the school gate smiled. “Don’t run! Careful you don't trip!” he shouted.

Jiang Shen ran past the gates, only to see Chen Maoxiu squatting with a group of people by the wall next to a little shop located beside the school gates. A lollipop was hanging from Goumao’s mouth. When he saw Jiang Shen, he was shocked. “School ended so early?”

Jiang Shen had never met Goumao’s friends from school, and from the way they dressed, they did not seem like students. Gripping the strap of his school bag tightly, he answered honestly, “I’m going to the Children’s Center.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Chen Maoxiu unwrapped a lollipop and handed it to him. “Hurry up and go, don’t be late.”

Jiang Shen accepted the lollipop, but did not leave immediately. He glanced at the people behind Chen Maoxiu. “Gou… Maoxiu-*ge*, aren’t you going to attend your classes?”

“I’ll go back in a bit,” Goumao glossed over, hurrying him away.

Jiang Shen needed to catch the bus, but as he left, he couldn't help but look back at Goumao several times. The latter had turned around and walked back to that group of people. “Who’s that?” one seemed to ask him.

“A neighbor’s kid,” Goumao answered breezily. “I’ve been helping to look out for him…”

Once on the bus, Jiang Shen was no longer in a rush. Sitting there in a daze, he thought about the people Goumao knew, as well as the things Qingling-*zi* had said. It felt as though his brain was unable to store that much information. Everything was rattling around his head in disarray; he nearly even missed the stop for the Children’s Center.

Quite a number of people were already in the studio. He looked around, but did not see Song Xin, so he went to ask Miss Lin, who actually did know something about it.

“School has started, and she needs to take extra classes.” Miss Lin gestured at the students to start doing their warmups, then looked at him. “You’ve started school as well, haven’t you?”

He nodded. “I’m only in grade three.”

She laughed. “Time will pass quickly. Soon, you’ll be in junior high too.”

“Once I’m in junior high, does that mean I can’t dance anymore?”

Miss Lin was surprised. “Who said that?”

“Song Xin brought it up before.” Effortlessly, he bent forward, his chest pressed right against the floor.

He was truly limber and flexible. After practicing all this time, both his front split and side split were perfectly straight. With Miss Lin supporting his waist, he continued practicing a few basic steps.

“Right now, things are still up in the air for her. She likes dancing very much, and should be able to continue on.” She then looked at him. “What about you? Do you like dancing?”

“I do.” He nodded earnestly, with no hesitation. “I want to continue dancing, and dance for the rest of my life.”

Miss Lin did not say a word. She sighed, her eyes gentling. In the end, she only patted his head lightly.

Bai Jinyi only had an opportunity to step away from the ring for a break once he finished his rope drills. He covered his head with a towel, beads of sweat dripping down his forehead. Lai Song had picked up an energy drink for him, and right as he twisted the cap open, he saw Jiang Shen poking his head through the backdoor, looking in.

“Little Swan,” Lai Song called out, “your class ended?”

A little shy, Jiang Shen did not dare come in. “Where’s Bai Jinyi?”

Bai Jinyi took the towel off his head. Arranging his hair, he seemed rather impatient. “What do you want?”

Jiang Shen was quite delighted to see him. “Come out for a moment.”

Bai Jinyi tossed his towel at Lai Song, walking out alone.

With his hands behind his back, Jiang Shen looked rather secretive. “Close your eyes first.”

Bai Jinyi’s thick, dark brows crumpled together. “You’re so annoying,” he said, though he still shut his eyes obediently.

Holding the box of Dove chocolates carefully, Jiang Shen presented it to Bai Jinyi. “Now open your eyes.”

Bai Jinyi was at a loss for words. He had one eye shut, while his other eye was opened just a sliver.

Jiang Shen grinned. “Dooove~ chocolates! They’re for you!”

Bai Jinyi still did not speak. He looked at the packaging, the price tag of 54.80RMB yet to even be removed, then at Jiang Shen’s foolish yet innocent smile, looking so proud yet pained at having prepared such a great gift.

“Try one,” Jiang Shen urged him, “they’re very tasty.”

Humoring him, Bai Jinyi placed a small piece in his mouth. He looked at Jiang Shen. “Do you want some?”

“No,” the other said determinedly. “I bought them for you.”

“You’re drooling.”

Jiang Shen immediately reached up to wipe his chin in alarm.

Snorting, Bai Jinyi said without any inflection, “I lied.”

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Lai Song was very surprised to see Bai Jinyi come back in with a big box of chocolates. “Who gave you that? Little Swan?”

Bai Jinyi nodded. “Mn.”

“Wow, he’s too sweet. You can’t eat too many things like that, though. There’s too much sugar.”

Bai Jinyi shot him a look, as if he could not be bothered to speak to him, and went in to look for his bag instead.

Like a shadow, Lai Song chased after him. “Give me one, I’ll share the burden with you.”

Bai Jinyi pretended not to hear, taking his bag out and shoving the box of chocolates in.

Lai Song’s face fell. “What? Why are you so petty? I can’t even have one piece?”

“No, you can’t.” Bai Jinyi closed the door of his locker, locking it before wrapping the string attached to his key a few times around his wrist. “Little Swan bought it for me and only me, got it?”

★

Before mid-October, the Jiang family finally welcomed their first overdue batch of harvest. The golden rice fields were bearing heavy ears of wheat, the sea of yellow and gold wild and lush. When Jiang Shen's classes ended, he hurried home, wanting to help in the fields, but was instead halted by his mother.

"Don't go." Tan Lingling prepared a basin of hot water for him to soak his feet. "Your Auntie Hua'er lent us a harvesting machine. Your father's driving it right now, so his back will be fine."

By now, Jiang Shen was able to go en pointe. His nutrition intake had now caught up as well, and his muscles were gradually becoming more defined. However, if he stood en pointe for too long, his joints swelled easily. Tan Lingling was afraid that he would hurt his tendons, so every time he came home after class, she would get her son to soak his feet, giving him a foot massage while he was at it.

"What did you learn at dance today?" she asked while massaging him.

Jiang Shen thought for a moment. "We learnt how to do a battement tendu jeté."

"What's that?" She laughed. "The name is so strange."

"It's when we kick our foot out," he explained, even demonstrating the movement, and ended up splashing water everywhere.

She wiped her face off, smacking his calf and scolding him. "Stay still!"

He giggled for quite some time as he picked up a dry towel and wiped his feet clean. Tan Lingling poured the water out, and when she came back, she told him, "Go to Auntie Hua'er's place later and bring Tony home."

"Why is it there? Isn't Goumao the most afraid of it?"

"Qingling-*zi* mentioned that she wanted to raise some chicks, so they borrowed Tony to breed their hens. It's extremely happy amongst your Auntie Hua'er's brood of hens right now, and is even helping to sit on the eggs."

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Tony the chicken was truly living a rich, colorful, chicken-y life. When Jiang Shen headed over, he saw a rooster with a brightly colored tail huddled in a nest, its expression saying that it was on guard against all strangers. Goumao and Qingling-*zi* could only crouch outside the coop, their faces filled with anticipation and fear.

Jiang Shen brought over the dumplings Tan Lingling had made, and Miao Hua'er insisted on keeping him for dinner. Just for that, she even called the Jiang family.

"Your mother agreed. I'll go cook now." Miao Hua'er ruffled Jiang Shen's hair after hanging up. "What would you like to eat? I'm making braised meat tonight. You can have all of it!"

"I won't be able to finish so much…" he answered shyly.

"Eat however much you can, then. You can't let Goumao take advantage of the opportunity."

"*Ma*, you're too biased!" Goumao protested loudly. He had probably heard her from outside.

She huffed at him. “Go watch your chickens!”

Jiang Shen went out to the yard as well. “Tony?” he called out, bending over.

Tony reacted to his voice, clearly recognizing Jiang Shen. It cooed a few times as it flapped its wings.

“Ah!” Qingling-*zi* tugged on her brother in excitement. “Look, look! I can see the eggs!”

Goumao placed a finger in front of his lips, gesturing for her to keep quiet. “Tony has a bad temper, don’t scare it.”

She immediately shut her mouth obediently.

It was rare for Jiang Shen to see Qingling-*zi* listen to her older brother. “How much longer until the eggs hatch?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Goumao replied. “There are only two eggs under him, and I’ve shone a light through them both. They all have little chicks inside.” He pointed at another nest next to Tony. “Over there, it’s about half-half. When the eggs under Tony hatch, do you want to take them home?”

Jiang Shen was looking forward to the little chicks too, so of course he accepted happily. The three children continued watching the rooster sit on the eggs with keen pleasure, only dragging themselves away unwillingly when Miao Hua'er called out to them from inside to wash their hands and sit down at the dinner table.

While eating, Qingling-*zi* was still thinking about the chicks. Halfway through her meal, she suddenly told Miao Hua’er, “I’m not going to eat chicken anymore.”

The latter was surprised. “What happened?”

The former pouted. “The little chicks are too cute.”

“Then you shouldn’t eat eggs either, since chicks come from those,” Goumao teased.

Eggs probably hadn't even crossed Qingling-*zi*'s mind. With round eyes, she was stunned and sorrowful. In the end, despite feeling that tiny bit of heartache, she was defeated by reality. “I want to eat eggs…” she mumbled, aggrieved.

Miao Hua’er was both amused and angry. She smacked her son’s head with her chopsticks. “Don’t bully your sister.”

Goumao dodged, but failed. “How did I bully her?!” he grumbled loudly. “Am I not allowed to tell the truth now?!”

Jiang Shen could not help but laugh. When he laughed, Qingling-*zi* started laughing as well. Goumao glared at them while holding his head.

After the meal, Jiang Shen helped Miao Hua’er clear the table. Goumao wanted Jiang Shen to take Tony away along with the nest, but did not have the courage to enter the coop, so he could only let Jiang Shen enter by himself. Tony was clearly rather unhappy; squatting down next to it, Jiang Shen stroked its wings.

“Let’s go home,” he said, carefully lifting the chicken up together with the basket. Tony flapped its wings, maintaining its balance. After finding a comfortable position, it huddled down, no longer moving.

In all honesty, the weight of a fat rooster along with two eggs was not at all light. Jiang Shen had no choice but to carry the basket in his arms. Goumao remained a far distance away from him, afraid that if he stood too close, the chicken would peck at him, especially with how unpredictable Tony’s moods were.

“You *have* to change your habit of speaking to your chicken.” Goumao was accompanying Jiang Shen home. “Pamper whatever you want, but you shouldn’t pamper a chicken.”

Tony twisted its neck, glaring at Goumao with one eye open.

Goumao shut up.

Jiang Shen was very amused. Carrying the basket, he hoisted it up towards his chest. Tony’s head brushed past his neck, clucking a few times.

“Goumao-*ge,*” Jiang Shen lifted his head, speaking suddenly as he looked at Chen Maoxiu. “Last time, when I went to the Children’s Center and saw you by the school gates… who were those people? Did you really skip school to go play?”

Chen Maoxiu choked a little. “How many times have I told you?! If you’re going to call me *ge*, don’t call me by that nickname anymore. It sounds so awful!” Pulling at his hair, he continued with a sort of disguised pride and embarrassment. “I didn’t skip class, I went to work.”

Jiang Shen did not really believe him. He looked at Goumao seriously, tilting his head.

“It’s true.” It was rare for Chen Maoxiu to be so solemn. “In about six months, it’ll be Qingling-*zi*’s tenth birthday. It’s a big occasion, so I’m going to buy her a set of oil painting brushes.” With a secretive tone, he then said with a heavy accent, “Have you heard of the brand Escoda?”

Of course Jiang Shen had not, so he could only shake his head honestly.

True pain appeared on the other boy's face. “It’s very expensive. Six months’ worth of pocket money, combined with all that I got during the New Year is still not enough, so I have no choice but to find a part-time job for the rest of the amount.”

Jiang Shen was unable to imagine how much money that was, so he could only ask about something else. “What kind of work have you been doing, then?”

Chen Maoxiu was very proud. “Those rich seniors in our school like to go to karaokeing, so I run errands for them, like buying drinks. I can double the amount of money I have like that. The most I’ve earned in a day is around two hundred RMB; if I keep going for another six months, I’ll be able to buy Qingling-*zi*’s brushes.”

“You’re not going to tell her?” Jiang Shen asked uncertainly.

“It’s a surprise! Why would I tell her?” Chen Maoxiu answered matter-of-factly. He seemed to be a little worried and commanded, “This is our secret, and you’re not allowed to tell her, either.”

After sending Jiang Shen and the chicken home, Chen Maoxiu returned home under the light of the moon. Miao Hua’er and Chen Laoshi were sitting in the yard, chatting and enjoying the breeze. Upon seeing him, Miao Hua’er asked, “Shen-*zi* is back home already?”

“Yes.” In a good mood, Chen Maoxiu went over to tease the chickens before picking up an enamel cup, about to brush his teeth and wash his face. “Where’s Qingling-*zi*?”

Miao Hua’er ordered Chen Laoshi to go inside and get a blanket for her. “She’s already asleep,” she replied casually. “She’s young, and children need more sleep.”

While squeezing out the toothpaste, Chen Maoxiu grumbled, “Why did *I* not need more sleep when I was younger…”

Although Miao Hua’er’s kick was unable to reach him, she still feigned one to scare him. He dodged her, revealing his teeth in a grin, which were all covered in toothpaste foam.

Chen Laoshi came out with a blanket, and the couple started chatting about something else.

“In another two years, we can stop Qingling-*zi*’s art classes.” Miao Hua’er covered her legs with the blanket. “Did you hear me?” she asked Chen Laoshi.

Rinsing his mouth, Chen Maoxiu’s ears perked up. He was still squatting down in front of the tap, and he turned to look at his mother, brows creasing deeply. “Why do we have to stop her classes? Isn’t she doing well?”

“What’s the point in drawing well? Can she live off of that? One can only make something of themselves through studying nowadays. A distraction like this is fine if the child is young, but in about two years, she will be entering junior high, and she needs to pay attention to school. How will she have time to draw?”

“How will she not?” Chen Maoxiu raised his voice. He straightened up, the corners of his lips still stained with flecks of white. “If she likes to draw, just let her draw! Who said that one can’t make something of themselves through drawing?!”

“Why are you so angry? Keep your voice down!” Miao Hua’er threw her blanket at her son. Nervously, she turned towards the house. When she saw that her daughter hadn't been woken up, she relaxed, and let her temper rise. “What do you know?! How many people who draw well become artists? Do you know how much money is wasted in a single year of art classes? It’s not your money, so of course you wouldn’t feel the pain!”

Gripping the blanket, Chen Maoxiu’s hands trembled slightly. His mouth opened and closed a few times, wanting to rebut his mother, but when the words were on the tip of his tongue, he was unable to say them out loud. In the end, he could only wipe his mouth vengefully with the blanket and threw it back onto his mother.

“You want to die?! You brat!” She shouted scornfully as she grabbed the blanket. “Who allowed you to take my blanket and wipe your mouth with it, huh?!”

Ignoring her, Chen Maoxiu entered the house. Thinking it over, his anger was still stifled in his chest, and he opened the refrigerator to take the milk out, only to turn around and see Qingling-*zi* standing at the door of her room, barefoot.

The little girl had been growing her hair out over the past four years, and right now, it was at her back. As she had been sleeping, it was somewhat disheveled. She seemed to have just woken up, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

Shocked, he hurried over and lifted his little sister up. "Why did you get out of bed? Where are your shoes?"

She glanced at him, her eyes a little red from rubbing.

"Were you dreaming?" he asked. He carried her back into bed, then managed to find her slippers that had been kicked away to some corner of the room.

Hugging her pillow, Qingling-*zi* lay in bed. Chen Maoxiu wrung out a warm towel to wipe her feet with, and when he was done, he tucked her under her blanket once more.

"Put your pillow down properly, and sleep well," he nagged like an old woman.

She opened her eyes. Surprisingly, she did not retort, merely putting her pillow on the bed and lying back down. "My sketches haven't been tidied up yet," she said suddenly.

Crouching down, Chen Maoxiu picked up her school bag. "You woke up because of that? You could have just called for me. I'll help you."

Qingling-*zi* did not say a word. She watched her brother as he sat down on the floor cross-legged, carefully tidying up her sketches. The moonlight in the countryside was clear and radiant like a gentle cocoon, streaming past the window, falling upon his shoulders.

★

The heavens would not disappoint a chicken with a willing heart. With Tony's hard work, the eggs under its butt finally cracked and hatched after twenty-one days.

Newly born chicks needed to eat and drink within twenty-four hours. Tan Lingling brought out the cornmeal and clean water that she had prepared earlier, and they fed the chicks like that for a couple of days. Soon, the down of the chicks was soft and fluffy, and they were yellow and adorable.

"In the future, they'll need to eat plants and meat, too." Tan Lingling placed the two chicks in a bamboo basket so that Jiang Shen could bring them to the Children's Center. "They can't be fed too many plants, as they could easily die from diarrhea."

"I know," he answered.

"Who are you giving them to?" she had to ask.

“Song Xin and Bai Jinyi. They get one each.”

“Does that rich friend of yours even know how to raise a chicken?”

“He should, I think.” Jiang Shen thought it over. “He has a huge yard at home.”

Because he was taking the bus with the chicks, Jiang Shen was very careful the whole trip. Even his walking speed was fifty percent slower than usual, and before he reached the dance studio, Song Xin was already waiting for him by the entrance. The moment she saw him, her eyes brightened.

“Be patient, be patient.” With too many people clustering around him, he nearly lost his footing. He placed the basket on the ground, and surrounding it was a bunch of little girls lying down, waiting in anticipation.

Song Xin’s face flushed with excitement. “I can hear the chicks chirping!”

Jiang Shen laughed. “They’ve been chirping the entire way.” Carefully, he removed the cloth covering the basket. Song Xin stretched her neck out. Once she saw the heads of the two little, yellow chicks, she exclaimed with a thrilled expression.

The other girls could not suppress their enthusiasm either. One after another, they squealed and giggled, every single one of them practically wanting to climb into the basket.

“Don’t grab them and mess with them,” he said seriously, “they’re still young. If you play with them carelessly, they’ll die.”

“I won’t touch them, I won’t,” Song Xin said hurriedly.

He handed her another basket, then lifted one chick up with both hands and held it out to her. “There’s cornmeal inside. Once that’s finished, I’ll bring more for you. Normally, you can also feed it some vegetables; just chop them up finely, and remember not to give too much.”

She hugged the basket as though it was a great treasure, wishing that she could inscribe what Jiang Shen had said into her brain, as though his words were scriptures.

Once he saw that she was doing fine with the chick, he carried the other basket over to the boxing gym next door. Lai Song was already standing by the door, having been watching them for a while. Upon seeing Jiang Shen, he immediately demanded, “What’s going on with you little fairies over there? Why have you been chattering away for so long?”

Jiang Shen ignored him, peering into the gym. “Where’s Bai Jinyi?”

Lai Song cocked a brow, then turned his head and shouted. “Richie Rich Bai!”

Bai Jinyi had just changed. With a somewhat impatient look on his face, he walked over slowly. “Looking for me?”

Good-naturedly, Jiang Shen looked back at him. “Yes, I’m looking for you.”

Lai Song stared at the basket. “What’s inside?”

“A chick.”

Lai Song blinked. “Why are you giving him one of those? For him to eat when it gets bigger?”

Jiang Shen was speechless. He really did not want to talk to Lai Song anymore — this guy had nothing but eating on his mind! He even wanted to wait for the chick to grow bigger since he could not eat it while it was still small!

Bai Jinyi shot Lai Song a warning glare. He reached out, removing the cloth on top of the basket.

The little, yellow, downy chick poked its head out. Turning around, it trembled and tucked its head back down, its chirps soft and aggrieved.

Both Lai Song and Bai Jinyi were stunned. With wide eyes, they stared into the basket as though they were looking at a terrible monster, and did not move for some time.

“Isn’t it cute?” Jiang Shen asked, praising his own wares.

Lai Song raised his hand and covered his eyes. “I’m not eating chicken ever again,” he said, in pain.

Bai Jinyi could not be bothered with him. He looked at Jiang Shen. “It’s for me?”

“Mn!” Jiang Shen shoved the basket into Bai Jinyi’s arms. “You must raise it well, and you can’t let it die,” he ordered solemnly and seriously.

With nervous looks on their faces, Bai Jinyi and Lai Song both sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the basket. Lai Song eyed Bai Jinyi secretly. “Are you really going to raise it?”

Bai Jinyi cast him a side-eyed glance. “If I don’t, will *you?*”

Lai Song waved his hands hurriedly. “Haha, this is such a precious chicken. I couldn’t afford to raise it.”

“What’s so precious about a chicken?” Bai Jinyi grumbled. “It’s cute when it’s young, but once it grows up, it’ll be… you know.”

He removed the cloth again and peeped inside. Lai Song leaned over as well. With their heads against each other’s, they looked at the little chick deep asleep in the basket.

It was unknown if poultry could dream. The little downy wings of the chick trembled slightly, and it chirped a couple of times, as though it was sleep talking.

Bai Jinyi and Lai Song both froze.

It was too fucking adorable!

“Just raise it. It was given to you by Little Swan,” Lai Song said in all sincerity. “Even when it grows bigger, you can’t eat it! You need to raise it until it’s an elder, then give it a proper burial.”

Bai Jinyi was at a loss for words.

After delivering his presents, Jiang Shen was jubilant. Face to face with Song Xin, they both practiced their splits and bends, whispering to each other the whole while.

"You bought new shoes?" Song Xin's eyes were sharp. She was the first to notice. "Are they more comfortable without that box at the front?"

Jiang Shen shook his feet. "They're fine… I got used to that pair already."

Song Xin laughed, then said seriously, "Still, you can't neglect practicing your footwork. It's the same for both boys and girls — you have to practice going en pointe properly."

"I know how to go en pointe." He was a little proud.

"You're still young." She sounded just like an adult. "When you grow up, male dancers pretty much never have to go en pointe." Seeming to recall something, she asked, "Have you watched the male version of *Swan Lake*?"

He sighed. "I don't have a computer at home… I can't watch it."

"Come watch it in the studio, then."

He shook his head. "I'm the only boy here. We can't watch the male version just because of me."

Song Xin thought that made sense. After a while, an idea popped into her head. "You can ask Bai Jinyi! He definitely has a computer; you can watch it on his!" she said happily.

"We'll see," he mumbled.

Miss Lin had arrived. The students, having finished their warmups, lined up in two rows. Following the beat, they practiced their basic steps; after their battements, they went for their relevés. Jiang Shen looked at his posture in the mirror, and could not help but sigh again.

He had racked his brain in order to come up with an idea to pay back the KFC meal from last time. If he were to borrow Bai Jinyi's computer this time… he really did not know how he could pay it back.

The three-hour-long dance class passed in the blink of an eye. After assigning some homework, Miss Lin did not stay behind. Song Xin was also in a hurry to go home and help her chick settle down. After tidying up the studio, Jiang Shen was too shy to go to the boxing gym again to find Bai Jinyi and Lai Song.

Right as he was packing up, someone familiar poked her head in from the backdoor.

"Qingling-*zi*?" He was startled. "Why are you here?"

The Children's Center was very big, and the art, calligraphy, and pottery classes were held in another building. Qingling-*zi* typically did not come looking for him, but for some reason, she had run all the way here today.

"Your class ended?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yeah, I'm about to leave. Shall we go together?"

She hesitated for a moment, then asked, "…Where did Goumao go?"

Jiang Shen froze. Today was Saturday. If Goumao was not in the fields, then he was most likely following his 'rich' seniors to karaoke to run errands and earn money.

That was a secret though, and he could not tell her.

"Is Maoxiu-*ge* not at home?" he answered, feigning ignorance.

She peered at him suspiciously. "You really don't know?"

He was not adept at lying, but he had also promised to keep Chen Maoxiu's secret, so he could only grit his teeth. "Mn."

Chen Qingling was a little unhappy. "Then I'll go look for him myself."

Jiang Shen's heart leaped into his throat. "Where are you going to look for him?"

She narrowed her eyes. "I'm not as stupid as you. I know who he's hanging out with in school, and *where* he's hanging out. Isn't it just karaoke places? I'll search through them all, one by one."

He did not know what to say.

No matter what, he could not let a little girl go to these karaoke places alone to search for someone. Unable to stop her, he could only follow her dutifully.

The two children had not brought much money, and could only take public transportation. Fortunately, the karaokes were all located around the city center, so it was not too difficult to look for them.

However, even though they had found them, they did not have any money to book a room, so they could not even enter. Chen Qingling refused to give up. Standing in front of the counter, she asked the cashier, "Do people not need to register when they go in?

The cashier laughed. "We're not an inn for people to rent rooms, and our customers are all decent, proper people, only here to sing. Why would they need to register?"

When Jiang Shen heard that the customers were all decent, proper people, he felt at ease. "See, Goumao isn't following any bad examples," he consoled Qingling-*zi*. "He only came here to relax during the weekend. You don't have to worry."

"Who's worried about him?!" she asked stubbornly.

His smile widened into a grin. He tugged her over to the main hall, then sat behind a plant. Just when he was thinking about how to persuade this little sister of his to leave, he suddenly heard someone call out to him.

"Little Swan!" Lai Song appeared from one of the rooms, calling for him loudly. "Little Swan, why are you here?"

Chen Qingling had yet to register what was going on. "Who's 'Little Swan'?"

Jiang Shen did not want to answer that.

Lai Song was not shy at all, running over very quickly. Upon seeing Chen Qingling, he became quite mischievous. “Yo, who’s this? Your little girlfriend?”

“No, no. She’s my sister,” Jiang Shen denied in a hurry.

Chen Qingling was a little on guard. “Who are you?”

Lai Song pointed at himself. “I’m your brother’s friend.” He then looked at Jiang Shen. “Are you here to sing?”

“I’m not here for singing,” Jiang Shen tried to explain. He looked around Lai Song, asking a little curiously, “Did Bai Jinyi not come with you?”

Lai Song’s eyes widened. “Him? How could he come? You gave him a chicken today; he was in a hurry to go home and take care of it!”

Jiang Shen had nearly forgotten about that. It was good that Bai Jinyi had not come though. He did not know why, but he felt a sort of relief. When he thought back on it in his muddle-headed state, he did not know why he was feeling relieved either…

While his brain was all confused, Qingling-*zi* suddenly exclaimed right next to him, and pulled Jiang Shen down into a crouch. They were both tiny, the plant enough to shield them fully. Poor Lai Song hid with them on reflex, but it was difficult for his muscular body to shrink into the limited space.

“What are you two doing, being all sneaky and secretive?” It was hard for Garbage Disposal Lai to have to speak in whispers, and the pressure on his vocal cords made him sound nasally.

Afraid that he would not cooperate, Jiang Shen could only explain the entire situation. “Qingling-*zi* came here to look for her brother… her *biological* brother, that one there.” He reached out, pointing into the distance.

With Garbage Disposal Lai’s 20/10 vision, it took him no effort to see. Frowning, he seemed to recall something, then slapped his thigh forcefully. “See, I knew I found him familiar! Isn’t he the errand boy for the group next door to us?”

Qingling-*zi* turned to look at him. “Errand boy?”

“Just watch for yourself.” Lai Song jerked his chin towards the group. “Recently, they’ve been coming often to sing. It’s always the same dozen or so people. The drinks at Biaoge KTV are too expensive, but we can thankfully bring drinks in from outside. That kid is their errand boy, helping them buy their drinks. We’ve let him buy our drinks for us before too, and he can earn about four to five RMB per drink.”

Qingling-*zi* did not respond. Hugging her knees, her eyes were fixed on Chen Maoxiu, who was outside collecting and counting money.

Jiang Shen desperately signaled at Lai Song with his eyes to stop talking, but the fool did not understand at all.

“We even asked him why he was earning money at such a young age. He didn’t look like he came from a poor family and needed money to pay school fees, after all.” Lai Song stroked his chin, laughing. “He actually said he wanted to buy a set of… some brand? Eh, whatever. Some fancy set of oil painting brushes.”

Jiang Shen had no words.

“Escoda,” Qingling-*zi* suddenly said.

“Right! That’s the brand!” Lai Song said. He paused, then finally realized what was going on. “Oh, is he buying them for you?”

Not replying, she stood up suddenly, but Chen Maoxiu could no longer be seen. With her back to Jiang Shen, she stood there for a while, motionless, only to suddenly run outside.

Startled, Jiang Shen said his goodbyes to Lai Song quickly and chased after her. “Qingling-*zi*!” he shouted. “Where are you going?!”

Chen Qingling did not know where she actually wanted to go. Carrying her drawing board on her back, she stopped within the constant stream of passersby.

Jiang Shen caught up to her. He turned to look at her, but the girl turned away, not saying a word.

He did not know what to say.

“That set is very expensive,” she suddenly said. “My parents know I want it, but it’s too expensive. They can’t afford to spend so much.”

Jiang Shen felt a little awkward. “I know—”

“In another two years, I might not be able to attend art classes anymore.”

Shocked, he asked hurriedly, “How could that be? Goumao’s always said that you’re going to be a great artist.”

She shook her head, raising her arm to wipe at her eyes harshly. “I hate my brother the most,” she said softly.

Jiang Shen had no response.

She looked up, smiling with reddened eyes. “I hate him the most.”

★

In the late autumn evening, the setting sun was like a piece of gold foil, gently covering the mountain peaks in the distance. Jiang Shen and Qingling-*zi* sat on the last row of the bus heading back to the village. One holding her drawing board and the other holding his ballet shoes, the two of them remained silent.

The scenery outside the window was like a slideshow projecting upon Jiang Shen’s face. In the shadows, he seemed to be experiencing troubles for the first time, sighing frequently.

It was said that youths did not understand the taste of sorrow. With how sour and acrid this sorrow tasted, it was indeed better if one never tasted it at all.

Qingling-*zi* got off the bus. She carried her drawing board on her shoulder, then looked at Jiang Shen. “Don’t tell my brother I know everything now.”

Jiang Shen opened his mouth and agreed feebly, thinking how keeping secrets for this one and that one was really giving him a headache.

The two children walked back home together. As they passed by the paddy fields, Qingling-*zi* stopped abruptly.

Jiang Shen followed her line of sight. Most of the crops had already been harvested, the leftover rice stalks gathered neatly and placed in the center of the fields. In another month or two, the adults would burn the stalks and use the ashes as fertilizer. In the coming year, it would once again be a piece of rich, fertile land.

"Shen-*zi*," she spoke softly. "Will you continue dancing?"

Jiang Shen thought for a while, before answering a little uncertainly, "I'm not sure, either…" He paused. "But, Qingling-*zi*… I hope you can continue drawing."

She looked at him.

Pressing his lips together, he revealed a somewhat sheepish smile. "Your brother most definitely wishes for that too."

When Qingling-*zi* got home, Miao Hua'er was washing apples in the yard. Upon seeing her daughter, she started nagging. "Why are you home so late today? Are you hungry? Do you want to eat now?"

"I have no appetite," Qingling-*zi* responded wearily.

Miao Hua'er normally doted on her daughter the most. Once she heard that she had no appetite, she became a little worried. "Why not? Did you eat something along the way?"

Qingling-*zi* did not want to listen to her nagging, so she gave a perfunctory "sure, sure," then ran back to her room, closing the door behind her.

Biting into her apple, Miao Hua'er was at a loss. Chen Laoshi heard the commotion from upstairs and made a trip down. He looked at his daughter's door for some time, then asked his wife cautiously, "What happened?"

With her teeth crunching into the apple, Miao Hua'er's voice was muffled as she spoke. "How would I know? Go knock on her door!"

"After closing it, has she ever opened her door for us when we knock? Could this be her rebellious stage?"

Miao Hua'er poked his head. "What rebellious stage? Qingling-*zi*'s nowhere near that age! She also isn't that brat, Goumao!"

Since Qingling-*zi* had left for her class in a hurry, the sketches Goumao had arranged neatly were once again in a mess. After setting up her easel, she crouched down and picked them up. As she did so, she suddenly became very frustrated, swiftly crumpling up a few and throwing them aside.

However, a little while later, the girl regretted her actions.

While wiping her face, she picked the sketches back up, smoothing them out. She did not make a sound, but more and more tears streamed down her face uncontrollably. One of the black lines of a sketch had been smudged into a tiny spot

— she wiped at it, and the spot turned into a puddle.

When Tan Lingling saw that Jiang Shen had returned home, she did not mention anything, only informing him that someone had called looking for him.

"Who was it?" he asked while eating.

"He said his name was Bai Jinyi. His voice was so cute, sounding so pleasant and polite."

"Is that so…" he grumbled. "He's not like that when he speaks to me."

She laughed. "Then what is he like?"

He thought it over. "He's always very fierce, no matter what."

Tan Lingling chortled, and Jiang Luoshan was unable to stop himself from laughing too. Jiang Shen was not very happy to be laughed at. When he was done with dinner, he did not help clear the table, and Tan Lingling just let him be.

Every night after dinner, he would review his dance notes. When the telephone in the living room rang, he did not think about answering it at all, until Jiang Luoshan started urging him. "That must be your classmate, *xiao*-Bai. Quick, go answer!"

Jiang Shen slowly shuffled his way over, having no choice but to pick up the phone."Hello?"

Bai Jinyi clearly recognized his voice. "Why are you so slow?" he asked placidly.

How do you know it's me? Jiang Shen grumbled mentally.

Bai Jinyi apparently did not expect an answer from him, and got straight to the point. "My chicken isn't eating anything. Do you have any way to make it eat?"

"It's not drinking any water, either?"

"Hold on."

Over the phone, Jiang Shen could hear a pair of slippers slapping away, then slapping back a minute later. "It doesn't look like it did."

Jiang Shen held his laughter in. "How would you know?"

"I measured the water bowl with a ruler. It didn't go down." Bai Jinyi's words were a little stiff.

Jiang Shen was speechless. This was the first time in his life that he had ever seen someone raising a chicken with such precision…

"Why aren't you saying anything?" Bai Jinyi pressed.

Jiang Shen coughed. "It's fine. It may be a little scared, as it's in an unfamiliar environment for the first time. It'll start eating at night."

Bai Jinyi did not really believe him. "It won't starve to death?"

Jiang Shen sighed. “It really won't die that easily…”

Having received a guarantee, Bai Jinyi seemed to feel a lot more at ease. He did not know what else to say, and after a bout of silence, he suddenly asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m looking at my dance notes,” Jiang Shen reported obediently. Then, he seemed to recall something and countered, “How do you know my phone number?”

“I asked Miss Lin for it.” Bai Jinyi’s tone had finally returned to its usual haughtiness. Even through the phone, Jiang Shen seemed to be able to see the boy lifting a brow with a proud expression.

“Go get a pen,” the boy suddenly commanded.

“For what?”

Despite the question, Jiang Shen still picked up a pen and paper obediently.

“Write my phone number down.”

Jiang Shen frowned. “I don’t have a cellphone…?”

“Just jot it down. You can call me with your home phone next time.”

There’s no reason I would ever seek you out, Jiang Shen thought. Still, he quickly wrote the numbers down. Looking at them after he was done, he realized that the eleven digit number was very easy to remember.

“Mine is an auspicious number,” Bai Jinyi bragged. “Other than you, I’ve never shared it with anyone before.”

Jiang Shen did not understand what an auspicious number was. After looking at the string of digits a few times, he committed it to memory. “I memorized it already.”

Bai Jinyi harrumphed in satisfaction.

Jiang Shen had never spoken on the phone for this long before. All the families in the village lived near each other, and whenever he wanted to look for his friends, all he had to do was go out and shout their names.

Bai Jinyi did not hang up, and Jiang Shen couldn't bear to do so either. His ear, plastered to the phone, was starting to get hot, so he had to switch to his other ear, making them take turns.

“Bai Jinyi,” he asked, “will you continue to box?”

“I will,” the other replied with no hesitation.

“Both your parents agreed?”

“Why would I listen to them? My mother didn’t agree when I started boxing, but am I not boxing now?”

That… sequence doesn’t seem quite right, Jiang Shen thought.

Bai Jinyi was clearly a lot more keen. “Your parents won’t let you dance anymore?”

“Not me…” Jiang Shen had not expected that he would guess correctly, and felt a little shy.“I have a little sister. She draws, but her family might not let her take classes anymore.”

“Does she want to keep on drawing?”

“Of course! Qingling-*zi* is going to be a great artist.”

“Then it’s fine, isn’t it?” Bai Jinyi answered, completely confident. “As long as she wants to draw, she’ll be able to.”

Jiang Shen sighed, a little anxious. “It’s not as easy as you think it is.”

He did not know how to put it in words. Suddenly, he realized that discussing this matter with Bai Jinyi was pointless. Lining up Bai Jinyi’s background against his own, they would never be able to have an equal discussion, no matter what. After gaining such an understanding, Jiang Shen actually felt a little desolate. For the first time in his life, sounding just like an adult, he said resignedly, “You’ll understand in the future.”

After ending the phone call with Bai Jinyi, Jiang Shen rubbed at his two reddened ears. Tan Lingling saw him and teased, “You’ll be seeing each other tomorrow, yet you spoke for so long today. You two can’t make it without contact for one night?”

“No… it’s not like that,” Jiang Shen said, embarrassed, then asked his mother, “Is Goumao back yet?”

“I haven’t heard anything. Why?”

Jiang Shen shook his head. “It’s nothing.” He then took some chicken feed out to the yard to feed Tony, occasionally glancing outside. Only after waiting for some time did he finally see someone making their way through the village entrance slowly. When they drew closer and came under the lights, Jiang Shen finally saw that it was Chen Maoxiu.

Goumao saw him as well. “Why are you not sleeping yet?” he asked, standing outside the gate. He even sneaked a look at Tony. Fortunately, the chicken was already sleepy, and could not be bothered to start anything with him.

“You’re back too late,” Jiang Shen replied.

“This is a rare opportunity…” He gestured at Jiang Shen to hold out his hand. “… for you.”

Jiang Shen looked down at the colorful wrapping paper in his own hand. “What is this?”

“Imported candy,” Goumao said, pleased with himself. “Half for you and half for Qingling-*zi*.”

Jiang Shen laughed in delight. “Thank you, Goumao-*ge*.”

Goumao ruffled his hair. “I’m heading back now. Sleep early, alright?”

Holding the candy, Jiang Shen nodded. He watched Goumao enter the house next door, then added some water into Tony’s bowl and shuffled back to his room in his slippers.

Miao Hua'er and Chen Laoshi were already asleep. On his tiptoes, Goumao made his way to Qingling-*zi*'s door quietly. The little girl was not the sort to stay still while asleep. Her blanket had been crumpled into a ball, and she was holding it to her chest. Sighing, Goumao straightened out her blanket, then placed the candy next to his sister's pillow.

She had been drawing for some time before she had gone to bed, and her charcoal pencils, paper, and easel were not put away. Unable to ignore the mess, he crouched down and packed them all up neatly for her.

He did not really know how to appreciate art, but he was still able to figure out that on the piece of paper, there was a sketch of someone's figure.

"Who did she draw?" Goumao murmured quietly, a little amused as he leaned in closer to study it. "Don't tell me that brat has someone she likes…"

★

Bai Jinyi had never raised a chicken before, and after doing some research on the internet, he felt that it was going to be a difficult, technical job.

The cornmeal and vegetables in the chick's food bowl were measured in grams, and its water bowl was switched out for one with scale markings. Every day — excluding when he was at school — he would visit his chick in the yard three times a day at fixed intervals. His actions left his housekeeper a little puzzled.

"Young Master." Auntie Zhu had been their family's housekeeper for over ten years now. "Have you completed your homework?"

Bai Jinyi nodded. "I did." He crouched down by the porch, reaching out and calling a few times.

The chick had already begun to recognize him. Downy and fluffy, it rushed towards him.

He stroked his thumb over its head, and looked to be in a pretty good mood. After petting the chick, he examined the food and water bowls with a great sense of responsibility.

Auntie Zhu laughed. "I've checked those already, Young Master. Everything's fine."

He thanked her, but still looked them over once again himself. Being rather obsessed, he even brought a scale over just to weigh the leftover cornmeal and vegetables.

She was speechless.

Ever since this Young Master Bai had been born, she had pretty much raised him singlehandedly. She had not brought him up with the most precise, particular methods, but for some reason, he had ended up with a personality like this.

"I'm going to the boxing gym now." He stood up. Recently, he had grown a little taller. As the winter holiday approached, his hair had grown quite a bit as well.

"The sliced beef is in the kitchen, I've prepared an extra box for you."

"Alright." Bai Jinyi picked up his bag, then waved. "I'm leaving."

The Bai family had its own chauffeur. After taking Bai Jinyi to the Children's Center, he did not leave, waiting there to pick Bai Jinyi up again once class ended. Lai Song knew about this; occasionally, he would greet the chauffeur as well.

"How's your chicken-keeping coming along?" Lai Song asked.

"I'm raising it very well, on a fixed schedule, with fixed amounts, and fixed locations."

Stunned, it took Lai Song some time to recover from that. "Why are you raising it so… fixedly?"

Bai Jinyi was baffled. "How else would I do it?"

At a loss for words, this was the first time Lai Song had witnessed what 'the rich kept chickens' meant.

The two boys were early, and not everyone was there yet, but it was quite lively over at the dance studio next door. Putting down his bag, Bai Jinyi pulled out the box of sliced beef.

Lai Song glanced at it. "Training hasn't even started yet, you're hungry already?"

Bai Jinyi ignored him, heading next door with the box.

Jiang Shen was already practicing his foundations. While in front of the mirror, standing up straight with his arms above his head, he saw Bai Jinyi's reflection, standing at the back door.

This was the first time the girls had ever seen Richie Rich Bai from the boxing gym come to the dance studio in person. All of them were extremely curious as they looked at the door. Song Xin stood up, raising her chin and asking reservedly, "Who are you looking for?"

Bai Jinyi looked at her. "Jiang Shen."

The girls all giggled amongst themselves, turned back, and clustered around Jiang Shen. They pushed at him, delivering him to the door.

Jiang Shen was a little bashful. "Why are you here?" he asked.

Bai Jinyi raised a brow, then handed the box to him. "This is sliced beef."

The other was astonished. "For me?"

"Yes."

Jiang Shen thought for a moment. "Do you want an egg?"

Bai Jinyi did not speak, nor did Jiang Shen wait for his response. He took an egg out from his bag. "For you."

Bai Jinyi hesitated for a moment, but still ended up accepting it.

Seeing him take the egg, Jiang Shen was very happy, smiling so delightedly that his eyes curved into crescents. Only then did Bai Jinyi realize that the boy had dimples.

Song Xin, on the other hand, started to chase him away. “Richie Rich Bai, our class is starting.”

Jiang Shen was a little reluctant, but he could only go and join the lineup. “I’m going to go dance now.”

“Go,” Bai Jinyi said. Holding the egg, he waved it slightly. “I’ll eat it.”

After finding out about Bai Jinyi using a box of sliced beef to trade for an egg, Lai Song did not put on an exaggerated display of surprise, only asking in slight curiosity, “Is Little Swan’s egg delicious?”

Bai Jinyi had just peeled the egg. Upon hearing this, he lifted his head and stated placidly, “It’s a hen’s egg.”

Question marks appeared all over Lai Song’s face.

Bai Jinyi ate half the egg in one go. “It’s not Little Swan’s ‘egg’.”

Speechless, Lai Song ruffled Bai Jinyi’s hair. “Why are you telling dad jokes? You’re too young for that, you little brat!”

Frowning, Bai Jinyi tried to dodge his hand, but failed. He could only tidy up his hair afterwards. When Lai Song saw him finish the egg, he sighed. “Little Swan is too nice to you, giving you chocolates and eggs and a little chick,” he said a little unhappily.

After arranging his hair, Bai Jinyi crossed his legs. “It’s because I’m good looking,” he said, a little smug.

Lai Song was left speechless. He gritted his teeth. “If you weren't too rich, I’d really beat you up!”

“Once we’re in the ring, you can beat me up however you like.” Bai Jinyi started wrapping his hands up.“You went to karaoke yesterday?”

Lai Song revealed a set of gleaming, white teeth. “I did. Are you joining us today?”

Bai Jinyi shook his head. “No. My mom’s coming home today. If she doesn’t see me, she’s going to nag again.”

“If you come, you might be able to see Little Swan.”

Bai Jinyi paused while wrapping his hands, a little surprised. “He also went yesterday?”

“Not to sing.” Lai Song passed him his boxing gloves. “He had a little girl with him, and they were there to look for someone — that boy who once ran errands for us.”

Bai Jinyi seemed to recall something like that.

Lai Song sighed emotionally. “It seems like that little girl’s family doesn’t want her to continue her art lessons anymore.” After a moment of silence, he continued, “Her brother wants to buy her a set of oil paint brushes, and that’s why he’s running errands to earn money.”

Ever since Chen Qingling started school, she hadn't really interacted with Chen Maoxiu there. Unlike that unfortunate brother of hers, she was good at studying. With her pretty appearance, she looked both neat and tidy inside and out — people could see that she was a child that had been brought up well with just a single glance.

Young children might not understand a lot of things, but their values were pure and straightforward. In their eyes, if an older student did not attend classes properly and always went out to play, that student was a bad student.

During lunch in the cafeteria, Chen Maoxiu once again paid for a meal and passed it to Jiang Shen to bring to Chen Qingling's table. He knew that she found him embarrassing, so for the sake of his sister's dignity, he avoided any attention in school when it came to her.

"Pass me the bowl once she's done eating," Chen Maoxiu instructed. "I'll wash it for her."

Agreeing, Jiang Shen was about to accept the bowl, when he suddenly heard Chen Qingling shout from a distance. "*Ge*!"

Shocked, Goumao thought he had misheard. As he stood there, he did not dare turn around, only whispering cautiously at Jiang Shen. "S-she's calling for me?"

The other did not know if he should laugh or cry. "Yes, she's calling for you."

Qingling-*zi* had already walked over. She looked at Jiang Shen, then turned her eyes towards her brother's face, frowning and seeming rather unhappy. "Why are you ignoring me?"

Goumao blinked. "I wasn't… are you hungry?"

She accepted the bowl. "I'll eat with you guys."

"What about your friends?" Jiang Shen asked.

A distance away, some girls who often played with her were looking over timidly. They whispered to each other, talking about something.

Chen Qingling did not care at all. "I've spoken to them already. Let's go, I'm hungry."

While eating, she did not speak at all. Shen Shubao and Jiang Shen exchanged a few glances, but they did not dare speak. On the other hand, Goumao was quite happy, furiously picking out all the meat from his bowl and placing them into his sister's bowl instead.

Unable to tolerate it anymore, Chen Qingling looked up. "Are you feeding a pig?"

"Hey, now. You're not as fat as a pig."

Chen Qingling was left wordless.

Shen Shubao coughed, changing the topic. "Qingling-*zi*, your birthday is after the winter holiday. What kind of gift would you like?"

Before she could speak, Goumao interrupted. "You can get her a PSP."

"…Is that for you, or for her?"

Goumao slapped his own chest, speaking as though he was in the right. “We’re siblings. Isn’t what’s mine hers, anyway?!”

Under the table, Shen Shubao kicked him. “Scram!”

The four finished their meal, and Goumao went to wash his sister’s bowl. For once, Chen Qingling did not simply leave, but stayed behind. Shen Shubao had also taken Jiang Shen’s bowl to wash, so the two younger children were squatting in one corner, licking the lids of their yogurt as they waited.

“Is it alright for you to eat with us?” Jiang Shen was not very experienced with licking the lid, and he kept bumping his nose into it. Wiping it clean, he continued trying. “What if your friends get mad?”

Chen Qingling had already licked her lid clean. Biting her straw, she mumbled, “Then they can just be mad… what, are they going to bully me or something?”

Jiang Shen sighed. “That’s what I’m afraid of, that they’ll bully you…”

Goumao rinsed the bowl loudly, and asked in a booming voice, “What are you two whispering about? Who’s bullying who?”

“Nothing.” Chen Qingling stood up. “Are you done washing?”

Shen Shubao handed the clean bowl back to Jiang Shen. “Are you still going to the Children’s Center after school?”

“Yes.” Jiang Shen nodded. “Qingling-*zi* is going with me.”

When school was about to end, Chen Qingling started packing up her drawing board and sketches. Rummaging through them for a little while, she discovered that one was missing.

The little girl looked through them again, her brows creasing.

Carrying his bag, Jiang Shen had already been waiting for a while. “What’s wrong?”

“One’s missing,” she answered while searching.

“Which one?” Jiang Shen bent down, wanting to help.

“It’s the one with…” Before she could finish, a few of the more vocal boys in class had walked to her desk.

Jiang Shen straightened up, noticing that behind them were the girls who were usually quite close to Qingling-*zi*.

“Chen Qingling.” The boy who spoke up first was the male class leader. On his arm was a patch with three stripes, and his face was taut and solemn. “A classmate said that you’re being led astray, hanging out with a hooligan at school. Is that so?”

Chen Qingling was baffled. “What hooligan?”

The class leader looked behind him, and one of the female classmates gathered up her courage to speak. “That one guy, Chen Maoxiu, a second year student in the junior high section. I’ve seen him skipping school to go out and play a few times.

Today, you were speaking with him and his friends, and you even ate together."

Chen Qingling's expression turned ugly. She peered at all of them, then held her hand out. "Were you the ones who took my drawing?"

"We've handed it to the teacher already!" the class leader said self-righteously. "You even drew him! Are you in a relationship?!"

She glared. Due to her anger, her face was flushing rapidly. "What do you know?!" She yelled, then pushed him away, her entire being vibrating with fury. "He's *not* a hooligan! You're not allowed to call him that!"

Probably because he had not expected such an agitated reaction, the young class leader froze for a few seconds before he rebutted loudly. "He *is* a hooligan! He's always skipping school! You've learned to be bad from his example!"

"*You're* the bad one!" Her eyes reddened, and even her hair was in disarray. She swallowed, then emphasized each word forcefully, "Chen Maoxiu is not a hooligan! He's the best person in the world — he's my brother!"

★

Qingling-*zi*'s drawing lay undamaged on top of the desk in the teacher's office. Even though it was only a sketch at the moment, Jiang Shen could immediately tell that it was Goumao's face. Their homeroom teacher's last name was Shen, and she was young. Her temper was usually very even, and she was very earnest and meticulous when it came to teaching.

"You cannot rummage through your classmate's desk like this again, understand?" Miss Shen lectured the student, expression stern. "It's very rude, and shows a lack of morals as well."

The little class leader had his head bowed. His eyes were red, as if he had just been crying. "I understand…"

"You must apologize to your classmate."

Feeling conflicted, the little class leader turned around and apologized to Chen Qingling in a small voice.

She did not accept the apology.

Miss Shen did not insist. Smiling, she returned the drawing back to Chen Qingling. "I've looked it over. It hasn't been damaged at all."

Chen Qingling finally gave her a small smile. She tucked the drawing into her folder carefully, then looked up. "Thank you, Miss Shen."

The woman patted her head. "Time to go to your art class."

On the road, Jiang Shen wanted to ask about the drawing, but Qingling-*zi* didn't seem to want to speak. Once at the Children's Center, they separated. Jiang Shen was a little late to the dance studio.

Miss Lin asked him to do his warmups by himself. Not too long later, Bai Jinyi came looking for him again.

Jiang Shen was a little apologetic. “I don’t have any eggs today…”

Bai Jinyi handed a box to him. “It’s fine. Eat this.”

Jiang Shen thought for a moment. “Do you want to eat strawberries?” he asked. As though afraid Bai Jinyi would refuse, he added, “We grow them ourselves. They don’t cost anything.”

The other raised a brow. “You even grow strawberries?”

“Yes. They’re nearly ripe now, so we can pick and eat them.”

Bai Jinyi thought it over, then nodded. “Sure.”

Jiang Shen was delighted. He still had to do his warmups, so he could not speak to Bai Jinyi for too long. The latter mimed holding a phone to his ear before he left. “Let’s talk again tonight.”

Because he had been late, Miss Lin asked him to stay behind a little after class. When the lesson finally ended, he did not even have time to pack his shoes, just leaving them hanging around his neck as he ran for the bus.

The bus driver had long come to recognize him, and knew that he was learning to dance. Every time Jiang Shen boarded, he would ask, “What did you learn today?”

“*The White-Haired Girl.*”

The driver laughed. “Will you be playing the role of Xi’er?”

Jiang Shen scratched his head shyly. “I’m a boy… I can’t be Xi’er.”

“Why not? You’re good looking enough!”

Jiang Shen blushed brightly. When the bus arrived at his stop, he fled quickly, too embarrassed to even say goodbye to the driver.

The book rental store by the bus stop was still open. The old man looked up. Upon seeing Jiang Shen, he called out to him, “You’re back.”

“I’m back,” Jiang Shen answered. He shoved his shoes into his bag. “You haven’t packed up for the day yet, *yeye*?”

There was a month left before the winter holiday, and the weather had now become fiercely cold. The little bookshop would remain open late into the evening during the summer, but when the weather turned chilly, the old man could not stand the cold, and would usually close up shop early.

Glancing at him, the old man put his pipe out and slowly started packing up. “Fine, I’m packing up now. Hurry up and go home.”

Despite what the elder had said, when Jiang Shen left, the man still didn't close straight away. He paused in his packing, lifted his trembling hand, and raised the lantern beneath the curtain.

The faint light scattered across the only asphalt road in the village, lighting the boy's way back home.

After scrambling to finish his dinner, Jiang Shen carried a small stool over to the telephone and sat there. While he looked over his dance notes, he would periodically look up towards the phone.

Tan Lingling walked past him a few times. "You don't even know what time he'll be calling. Why are you waiting already?" she could not help but remark.

"He could at any moment," he muttered.

"Next time, you should agree on a time, so you're not acting like you're waiting for the stars and moon to fall into your lap."

Right as he thought to protest, the phone suddenly rang. The boy picked it up hurriedly. "Hello?"

Right beside him, Tan Lingling almost couldn't hold in her laughter. Her son glared at her, upset.

"Why do you sound so nauseating today?" Chen Maoxiu's voice came through the phone, sounding a little disdainful.

"…Oh. It's you…" Jiang Shen said, guilty.

"Who did you think it was?"

"…What do you need?" Jiang Shen evaded the question.

"Did something happen to Qingling-*zi* recently?"

"No?" It was a lot easier to lie over the phone, and it was less of a burden for him. "She's a girl, so she definitely has some secrets she wants to keep to herself."

"…Who did you hear that from, it's so girly."

"There are many girls in my dance class. They're the ones who told me that."

Chen Maoxiu's thought process was very simple, so he did not suspect Jiang Shen in the slightest. "Really?"

"Really!" the other insisted.

Unable to think of any other reason, Goumao cheered up. "You don't know how sweet that girl's being right now, or how she keeps calling me *gege*." Imitating Qingling-*zi*'s voice, Goumao increased his pitch. "*Gege* I want to drink yogurt! *Gege* I want to eat strawberries! *Gege* I want to look at the chicks… ahhh, she's so adorable now."

Jiang Shen could not bear to crush Goumao's dreams, but it looked like… Qingling-*zi* definitely had a very firm grip on her brother's affections.

Less than two seconds after ending the call with Goumao, the phone rang again. Jiang Shen thought it was Goumao up to something else again, so without thinking at all, he picked up and answered, “What is it, now?!”

“What is what, now?” Bai Jinyi asked, inflectionless.

Jiang Shen was shocked.

“Who were you talking to on the phone?”

Jiang Shen really wanted to die. “My friend… that neighbor I mentioned before.”

“Chen Maoxiu?” Bai Jinyi had a very good memory. Lai Song had mentioned this person to him before as well.

Jiang Shen didn’t expect him to remember so clearly. “You’re really quite smart,” he said, his sincerity overflowing.

Bai Jinyi snorted.

Jiang Shen chuckled. Holding onto the receiver, he switched it to his other ear. “What are you doing?”

“I’m looking at the chick.”

“Has it grown yet?”

“Yes. I’m taking its height and weight every day.”

Jiang Shen was speechless. However, it was not his place to critique Bai Jinyi’s precise chicken-keeping methods.

“Does it need any vaccinations?” Bai Jinyi asked suddenly.

Jiang Shen pondered that for a little while. “I… I don’t think so?”

“You don’t vaccinate your chickens?”

“The chickens in our village are free-range,” Jiang Shen answered helplessly. “None of them have ever been raised the way you raise yours, on such a precise schedule where you take their height and weight daily, nevermind vaccinations.”

“You raise your chickens too carelessly,” Bai Jinyi lectured, his tone somewhat brash.

Jiang Shen was at a loss for words.

“Have you picked the strawberries yet?” Bai Jinyi started to worry about something else entirely.

“In a few more days, we will.” An idea seemed to pop into Jiang Shen’s head, and he became excited. “Do you want to come to our village during the holidays? You can pick the strawberries yourself.”

After a bout of silence, Bai Jinyi answered, “Not this year.”

Jiang Shen was surprised. “Why?”

“I’m going to the States over the New Year. I’ll be meeting a professional boxing coach.”

Jiang Shen’s mouth fell open. For a moment, he did not know what to say. The words Bai Jinyi had said were not complicated, but whether it was ‘the States’ or ‘professional boxing coach’, those were all things that could not be further from Jiang Shen.

They were just like stars, glittering in the sky. Enviously, he tried his best to look up, but in the end, he did not even have the courage to reach his hands out towards them.

“Little Swan,” Bai Jinyi called out to him abruptly.

“Hm?”

Bai Jinyi paused. “You don’t have to overthink it.”

Jiang Shen tightened his grip around the receiver, not saying a word.

“You’re beautiful when you dance,” the other boy suddenly said.

Embarrassed, Jiang Shen’s face was a little warm. “No, I’m really not—“

“In my eyes,” Bai Jinyi interrupted, “you’re also someone that’s like the stars and the moon.”

Jiang Shen did not know how to respond.

“You must wait for me to come back,” Bai Jinyi said sternly. “You can’t eat my strawberries.”

“Mn,” Jiang Shen agreed. He grinned. “I won’t eat any. I’ll leave them all for you.”

Chapter 5 — A Young Girl's Dream

A month passed in the blink of an eye, and the winter holidays arrived.

The village's wild puppies, after being trapped in school for an entire semester, were finally free to play to their hearts' content. No matter how cold the winter was in the village, it could not hinder the children's excitement at all, especially since this was the first snow of the season. Before the snow could even pile up, whether it be the children or actual dogs, indoors or out, they all went mad with joy.

Tan Lingling wrapped Jiang Shen up firmly in a cotton-padded jacket, his hat and scarf covering more than half his face. Goumao and Shubao were already outside waiting for him.

"Are you done yet?" Goumao rushed him loudly.

Jiang Shen straightened his scarf. "Yes, yes!"

It was too cold, and Tony's feathers seemed to have fluffed up another size. Its big, colorful tail was raised up high, and the rooster stood alone on top of the yard gate, occasionally pecking at the snow gathering there.

Shubao saw Jiang Shen walk out. Both the upper and lower halves of the younger boy's face were covered, exposing only his shiny, bright eyes.

"Where are we going to play?" Jiang Shen asked excitedly.

Goumao threw his arm around Jiang Shen's shoulders. "We're going to the grassland by the water! Qingling-*zi* has already headed over. We're going to look at the ducks! Dig holes in the ice! Light firecrackers!"

Digging holes in the ice was something all the boys liked to do in the winter. Due to the weather in the south, the ice never got too thick. If they dug a hole where the grassland was shallow, they could even fish for loaches. Jiang Shen and Qingling-*zi* were young, so they could only watch from solid ground. Goumao lit the firecrackers up in the grass. Crackling, the sparks shot everywhere, badly frightening the ducks swimming nearby.

"Aren't the ducks cold?" Qingling-*zi* couldn't help but ask.

Shubao glanced at them. "They're only swimming for a short while. See? The boat is here."

A reed boat glided over, and the boatman and children exchanged greetings. The oar skimmed through the water, all the ducks scrambling to get up onto the boat. A few of them stood at the stern, shaking their feathers out, then turned to comb out the beads of water.

Chen Qingling said in admiration, "They're really so cute."

Chen Maoxiu replied, "Wait until spring, when the baby ducklings are even cuter. The big ones will lead the little ones, swimming in a row."

Shubao laughed, asking, "Do you guys want ducklings? I'll buy one in the spring."

Jiang Shen thought about it. “Not for me. If I raise another pet, Tony is going to get jealous.”

Goumao could not stand what he was saying. “You’re still raising that chicken? It’s so fat and healthy, it’ll be such a waste not to eat it for the New Year.”

Jiang Shen shot him a look. “You can try catching it. If you manage to catch it, you can have it for *your* New Year dinner.”

Goumao was speechless.

Naturally, the loaches that were caught would be taken back home to feed Tony. When the children passed by the fields, they discovered that the adults were still busy checking the temporary greenhouses.

From the edge of the fields, Jiang Shen shouted, “*Baba*!”

Jiang Luoshan looked up, smiling. “Are you cold?”

“Nope,” Jiang Shen ran over. He crouched down and saw the rice stalks spread out around the greenhouses. He looked up, asking Jiang Luoshan, “When are you burning them?”

Jiang Luoshan crouched down together with him. “When spring comes, probably. Uncle Chen next door has just finished with his as well, and we’ll burn them together in the spring.”

Jiang Shen nodded. From the edge of the fields, Shubao called out to him, “Shen-*zi*, come to my house for the strawberries.”

Jiang Luoshan patted his son’s head through his hat. “Go on.”

A while ago, all the strawberries at Shen Shubao’s place had been picked by the children. They had not planted that many in the first place, and the three portions had been divided by counting the strawberries one by one. Jiang Shen counted the strawberries in his box, and there were twenty-four in total. Carefully, he placed the lid back onto the box.

Goumao and Qingling-*zi* had already started eating their share, and they asked him, “Why aren’t you eating?”

Jiang Shen shook his head, saying solemnly, “I want to give them to a friend.”

Shubao asked, “When are you giving it?”

“After the winter holidays, I think.”

Shen Shubao raised a brow, and could not help but burst his bubble. “Even if it’s winter, and the weather is cold, the strawberries won’t be able to keep for that long. After the winter holidays, they’ll have turned to mush.”

This issue hadn’t even occurred to Jiang Shen. Looking as though the sky had fallen, he exclaimed, “Then what should I do?!”

Shubao and Goumao exchanged a look, and the latter scratched his head. “How about turning them into dried strawberries?”

Qingling-*zi* gave the two older boys a scornful look, asking doubtfully, “Do you know how?”

Goumao glared at his sister. “Don’t you have a computer? Look it up!”

In the end, the four headed to Goumao’s house, looking up how to dry strawberries on Qingling-*zi*’s computer.

“Soak the strawberries in water and wash them clean…” Qingling-*zi* directed, while Shubao and Jiang Shen clumsily got a basin and filled it with water.

Goumao asked, “How long do they need to soak for?”

Qingling-*zi* frowned. “It doesn’t say… Who cares? Just soak them for ten minutes. You‘d better wash them clean.”

Jiang Shen started to wash the strawberries meticulously.

“Remove the stems.” Qingling-*zi* kicked Goumao a few times. “Get to work!”

Goumao answered, “Yes yes!”

Qingling-*zi* continued, “Add some sugar… How? Just scatter it on top?”

Shubao brought the jar of sugar over. “We can only scatter it.” Working with Jiang Shen, the two boys scattered a bit of sugar on top of every strawberry. The red flesh of the fruit was now covered in starry, white dots, looking very adorable.

Qingling-*zi* was a little troubled when she saw the last step. “But we don’t have a dehydrator…”

Goumao was baffled. “What sort of trendy thing is that?”

Shubao thought for a moment. “Why don’t we put it in the stove? Shen*zi*, don’t you have one at your house? The top of the stove is used for cooking, but there’s some kind of shelf between the fire and the top of the stove. Can we try putting the strawberries in there to bake?”

Jiang Shen had occasionally seen Tan Lingling roast chicken and duck on that shelf, but it was not used often now, as starting the fire and waiting for it to heat up were both troublesome and a waste of time. However, they had already gotten to this point, and could not just give up on the dried strawberries halfway. As such, the four of them went to look for Tan Lingling excitedly, carrying two large bowls.

Tan Lingling was at a loss for words.

She looked suspiciously at the children, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes. “Who came up with this idea?”

The four children chimed simultaneously, “Me!”

Tan Lingling burst out laughing. “Afraid that I’ll scold someone?!”

Goumao immediately began flattering her, “Of course not, Auntie Lingling is the gentlest and the prettiest!”

Standing on the side, Jiang Shen nodded frantically.

Unable to take it anymore, Tan Lingling said, “It’s useless no matter how sweet your words are. Those who have to chop wood, go chop wood. Those who can start a fire, go start a fire. You have to do your own tasks yourself!”

As long as Tan Lingling was willing to help, no task would be too difficult. Shen Shubao and Chen Maoxiu went to chop firewood, while Jiang Shen and Qingling-*zi* followed Tan Lingling, cleaning out the stove.

Tan Lingling took out a big, flat-bottom pan, arranging the strawberries in it evenly. She added some honey water, then covered the pan with a lid. After the firewood was ready, she boiled some water on the stove. Once the fire was big enough, she reduced the amount of kindle, and placed the pan onto the shelf.

She instructed Jiang Shen. “Every half hour, you have to take the pan out and flip the strawberries to prevent them from burning.”

Jiang Shen nodded furiously. He had some ash on his face, and looked very comical.

The other children waited along with him, and half an hour later, they took it out to flip. The honey coated strawberries had been roasted to a shiny, gleaming gold, and the delicious scent filled their noses.

“Wow.” Goumao could not help but drool. “Can we eat them now?”

Jiang Shen blocked him. “No!”

Goumao was unhappy. “I even helped you chop the wood! Even if I don’t get any credit, I at least put in the hard work. Come on, just let me have one.”

“No,” Jiang Shen refused him righteously. “For the next few days, I can go over to your place and help you feed the chickens instead, but I can’t let you eat the strawberries.”

Shen Shubao laughed. “Who are you giving them to? Treasuring the strawberries like that.”

Jiang Shen’s face was hot and red from the fire. After flipping the strawberries over, he placed the pan back into the stove carefully, and said softly, “I’m giving them to a person most important to me.”

He looked back, eyes bright like star fire, and smiled, shy yet warm. “They’re all for him, and only him. I promised.”

★

Jiang Shen’s Chinese New Year had never been so busy before. He made dried strawberries, collected red packets from his neighbors, took care of the chickens at Goumao’s house, and lit firecrackers with his friends. This was also the first time he rushed to finish his holiday homework in the middle of the night, and on the night of the New Year’s Eve, he even received a call from Bai Jinyi.

“Are you in the United States?” Jiang Shen’s end was full of the ear-splitting sounds of firecrackers. Jiang Shen covered one of his ears, almost shouting into the phone.

Bai Jinyi asked, “Why is it so noisy on your side?”

“We’re lighting firecrackers, since it’s going to be the New Year soon.”

Bai Jinyi then asked, “Why aren’t you lighting them up too?”

Jiang Shen said earnestly, “Because I want to talk to you.”

Bai Jinyi seemed to laugh, only to hear Jiang Shen continue, “It’s a call from the United States. It’s so amazing to receive a long-distance call.”

“What’s so amazing about that?” Bai Jinyi snorted. “We’re still on the same planet.”

“But we’re so far apart. I’ve looked at the globe in Goumao’s house before. There’s a huge ocean between us, but we can still speak like this. How nice.”

Bai Jinyi laughed again. Recently, he seemed to laugh more often when he was with Jiang Shen. When he was in front of Jiang Shen, he still liked to suppress it, but through the phone, he would laugh more frequently.

“Little Swan.” Bai Jinyi listened to the firecrackers on the other side of the world, suddenly saying, “I wish you a happy New Year.”

Winter left and spring came. The Jiang and Chen families burned their rice stalks together, and used the ashes as fertilizer. The flowers in the fields bloomed again in the new season, and the beautiful colors drew young girls to pick them. Qingling-*zi* also wanted to keep up with the times, so Goumao had no choice but to follow. When Jiang Shen came home after dance practice, he saw Goumao and Shubao still working hard in flower fields, giving their utmost efforts.

Qingling-*zi* raised her flowers and waved them at Jiang Shen. “You’re back!”

“I’m back!”

Today, before class ended, he had been held back by Miss Lin. She said they were going to practice a ballet with two leads. Not only did he need to dance the male role, he also had to do a portion of the female role.

“You’ll be starting Grade Four soon. Rehearsals for the ballet will go on for a long time. In the second semester of Grade Six, the Children's Center will put on a show. This ballet will be performed then.” Miss Lin looked at him, speaking in all sincerity, “There will be quite a number of famous teachers coming to watch this show. If they select you, it will be a very good thing.”

Jiang Shen did not really understand what it meant to have famous teachers come and watch the show. He only knew that the musical was very important, and that he must dance well.

Other than the ballet, Jiang Shen’s other worry was that Bai Jinyi hadn’t come to the boxing gym in a very long time.

He went next door a few times with the dried strawberries, but it was always just Lai Song coming out alone.

"Can you give this to him?" The last time he went, Jiang Shen had no choice but to pass the dried strawberries to Lai Song. "If you happen to see him."

Lai Song lifted the container up to see. "What is it?"

"Dried strawberries." He instructed, "You can't eat them, alright?"

Lai Song snorted. "Fine, fine, I won't eat them."

Put at ease, Jiang Shen smiled, but his mood was still a little down. Scratching his head, Lai Song could only say, "I really don't know when Richie Rich Bai will be coming back. All I heard is that the boxing coach he found in the States looks quite favorably on him. Perhaps even if he did come back, he wouldn't be training here anymore."

Jiang Shen frowned. "Then where will he train?"

Lai Song thought for a moment. "Probably in one of the big cities, Shanghai or something."

Jiang Shen and Qingling-*zi* sat together in the sea of flowers. Surrounding them were lively, blooming barbed skullcaps and marigolds. Qingling-*zi* picked a handful, taking her time to arrange them into a bouquet, then asked him, "Does it look pretty?"

Jiang Shen glanced at it, nodding. "It's pretty."

Qingling-*zi* pouted. "What are you thinking about?"

Jiang Shen sighed. "Qingling-*zi*, will you go to a big city to learn drawing?"

"A big city?" Qingling-*zi* exclaimed. "I don't even know if I'll be able to continue my classes. The big cities are too far away. But I know that for people who want to study art, they can take some exams. After junior high, I'll go to high school, and in high school, after taking the arts exam, I will be able to go to an arts university to study."

Jiang Shen did not speak. Ballet had its own technical examinations as well, but they were for amateurs. Miss Lin had said before that professionals did not have to take exams, but in order to attend an advanced ballet academy, one had to be selected by the school.

Qingling-*zi* looked at Jiang Shen, asking doubtfully, "You don't really want to dance your whole life, do you?"

Jiang Shen was silent. After some time, he said slowly, "Will you be coming to the Children's Center show?"

"Of course!" Qingling-*zi* swung her feet. "But it's still early. Will you be performing?"

Jiang Shen nodded. "Help me invite Goumao and Shubao as well."

Pressing his lips together, he smiled, a little embarrassed. “At that time, I’ll dance for you all to see.”

The passing of time was cheeky during childhood; never enough to use, and never enough to play.

Goumao had finally saved up enough money, and bought his sister the Escoda oil paint brushes. Qingling-*zi* completed her painting, titling it *My Brother*. To everyone’s surprise, it won the gold prize for the National Youth Painting Competition. The painting was even framed by Chen Maoxiu and hung up specially on the wall of their living room. Anyone who went to their house would have to listen to him brag about it.

Shen Shubao was the only one in the village who had been accepted into a top high school. His vision had worsened by a few more degrees. Normally, while he was at school, he would feign the look of a scholarly student, but once he was back in the village, he still took off his shoes and pants, messing around with Chen Maoxiu in the fishpond.

In the last half of the year, Jiang Shen finally finished learning the ballet that Miss Lin had choreographed. The female lead was Song Xin.

“You dance this part so well.” Song Xin and Jiang Shen were watching a recording of their rehearsal in the studio. “How come you look better doing this move than me?”

Jiang Shen laughed. He had grown taller, and the lines of his muscles were clearly defined. He sat casually with his legs bent. “But there are also some movements you can do that I can’t.”

Song Xin glared at him. “You can even dance the *Green Waist Dance*. You performed it last time.”

Jiang Shen laughed softly, but did not speak. He and Song Xin continued watching for a little while more, until Lai Song came over to get them.

“Are the two of you done yet?” Lai Song was already in his second year of high school. He was over 185cm, and due to boxing regularly, his sturdy, bouncer-like figure was rather scary. However, when he smiled, he still looked like his usual, foolish self.

Song Xin rolled her eyes. “No one asked you to wait for us.”

Lai Song leaned against the door. If he bent his arm, it would touch the doorframe. “Who said I was waiting for you? I’m waiting for Little Swan!”

Jiang Shen stood up to change, and when he came back, the two were still arguing with each other.

“Enough.” Jiang Shen looked at Song Xin. “Want to go eat something?”

Song Xin sighed. “I can’t drink milk tea; I can’t put on any more weight.”

Lai Song sniffed. “You dancers have it hard.” He took out a box from his bag and handed it to Jiang Shen. “Richie Rich Bai asked me to give this to you.”

Over the past two years, Bai Jinyi didn’t really come to the boxing gym much anymore. Even when he came, it was only to look for Lai Song or Jiang Shen. However, their calls went on as normal, happening two or three times a week. Tan Lingling often teased them for having a 'long-distance friendship'. Their phone calls were like job reports; they practically shared everything they had done that day.

Other than the phone calls, the two boys also gradually increased their frequency of exchanging gifts. Bai Jinyi probably had nothing but money, and everything he bought was for Jiang Shen to use. His most expensive gift was a phone, and Jiang Shen nearly died from shock when he received it. The boy did not touch it for a few days, not daring to use it. It wasn’t until Bai Jinyi called, rushing him and telling him they could use it for video calls, that Jiang Shen finally accepted the gift.

In comparison, the presents Jiang Shen prepared were a lot simpler. There were fresh tea leaves, jam he made himself, salted duck eggs he preserved himself, loquats and bayberries of early summer, and hairy crabs of late autumn. As soon as Bai Jinyi received these items, he would take a photo and send it to Jiang Shen. The two even shared WeChat Moments, and would like each other’s photos.

“You guys are too mushy.” Lai Song ordered some fried chicken, throwing away all the crispy skin. “Is the phone fun?”

Jiang Shen ordered a glass of sugar-free milk tea, sipping slowly at the straw. “It’s fine.”

“What apps do you use?”

Jiang Shen said honestly, “Only WeChat, and it’s just to communicate with Bai Jinyi.”

Speechless, Lai Song grumbled, “You’re not Richie Rich Bai’s child bride…”

Jiang Shen did not hear what he said. He was unwrapping the parcel Bai Jinyi had given him. Opening it, he saw that it was a pair of brand new ballet shoes.

Resting his head in his hand, Lai Song said, “Try it on for size. If it doesn’t fit, I’ll return them for you.”

“Why would it not fit?” Jiang Shen’s smile was so big, his eyes crinkled. He stroked them, as though they were treasures, and said happily, “Bai Jinyi would never get it wrong. He even knows what size clothes I wear.”

Lai Song was even more at a loss for words.

★

This show was very important to the entire Children’s Center, especially for the performing arts students. Normally, at this time, all the well-known teachers and professors of various institutes across the country, and even well-renowned dancers from both the North and South might personally attend to select young students that

they believed had potential.

Miss Lin had never told Jiang Shen about this before, but she did mention it to his mother, Tan Lingling.

Back at home, Jiang Luoshan sat in the yard, remaining silent for some time before saying slowly, “I had always thought that Shen-*zi* was just pursuing a hobby…”

Looking at him, Tan Lingling sighed. “From what Miss Lin said, it seems like she has recommended Shen-*zi* to quite a number of people.”

Jiang Luoshan frowned, and did not answer.

Naturally, Tan Lingling wanted the best for her son. If, as she had said before, a dancer really could come from their family, as a mother, she could even laugh in her sleep.

However, a dream was only just a dream. Children could be happy and joyful in dreams, while things were not so easy for adults. Putting aside whether or not he would even be chosen; if he really was selected, this tiny, rural village would no longer be enough to hold Jiang Shen’s dreams.

Moving to the big city to live, learn, and train; these were all difficult things, even for adults. Furthermore, in today’s times, everything required both money and favors from others…

Tears welled up within Tan Lingling’s eyes, as she felt both ashamed and unwilling. “Then are we not going to let Shen-*zi* study ballet anymore…?”

“What are you saying?” Jiang Luoshan patted his wife’s back. “Weren’t you thinking that Shen-*zi* might actually become a dancer?”

Tearfully, Tan Lingling wiped her eyes as she shook her head.

Jiang Luoshan looked up at the night sky. The village was different from the city, and the stars here were dense and bright. The starlight scattered down upon the paddy fields in the distance, and from the ditches, where clear water rippled slowly, came the croaking of frogs.

The show would be held on the weekend. The night before, Jiang Shen and Bai Jinyi spoke on the phone.

“Are you nervous?” Bai Jinyi asked suddenly.

Jiang Shen thought about it, “I wasn’t before you asked. But now that you’ve asked, I am, a little.”

Bai Jinyi snorted a laugh.

“Will you be coming to watch tomorrow?”

Bai Jinyi said lazily, “You’ve already sent the ticket all the way over here. How could I not come?”

Jiang Shen laughed sheepishly, then heard Bai Jinyi say, “Hold on a moment.”

Jiang Shen waited obediently, only to hear Bai Jinyi seemingly talking to someone else. After a while, the sounds on the other side of the line faded away.

“What happened?” Jiang Shen asked curiously.

“The housekeeper asked if I wanted a midnight snack.”

Jiang Shen was a little envious. “I want some too…”

Bai Jinyi said generously, “Next time, come stay with me, and I’ll ask Auntie Zhu to make some for you.”

Jiang Shen agreed happily, then asked about something else. “How is Bai’er?”

Bai’er was the chicken Bai Jinyi was raising. It had grown very large by now, doted and spoiled upon since it was young, and showered with love and affection. It truly was a chicken of prosperity.

Bai Jinyi didn’t seem to be very happy. “It’s too fat. I’ve clearly been watching it closely, feeding it on time and in exact amounts. I don’t know if my parents have been feeding it other things when I’m not around. For the past two months, I’ve been forcing it to take walks around the yard.”

Jiang Shen did not know how to respond to that. After so long, he still didn't really understand Bai Jinyi’s methods of chicken raising. In his eyes, not even the babies in the village would be brought up like this. Many could be found without pants in the fields, even eating dirt, and none of them were as pampered or delicate as the chicken raised by Richie Rich Bai.

Jiang Shen could not help but sigh deeply. “Exactly how fat is it?”

Bai Jinyi said icily, “So fat that I worry it’ll get diabetes, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure.”

Jiang Shen was speechless.

The afternoon of the show, Jiang Shen and Song Xin arrived very early. They still had to go through the story one more time, and do a final dress rehearsal.

The ballet Miss Lin had choreographed for them was a story about a god of the earth. Thousands of years ago, the god descended to the mortal realm, showering blessings upon the land, building tall mountains, and digging up rivers. The god of the earth was like a man, yet not, and like a woman, but also not. The subjects of the kingdom loved them, yet feared them as well. Finally, the mountains and rivers collapsed and fell, and the god of the earth transformed into a hawk, flying far into the distance.

“The part of ‘like a man, yet not, and like a woman, but also not’, the two of you will be dancing together,” Miss Lin instructed. “You must pay attention to your movements. Song Xin, you also have to dance Jiang Shen’s part. Do your best to showcase the strength and beauty of the male form.”

Song Xin wrinkled her nose. “Jiang Shen dances the female part better than me. I’m too ashamed to dance it anymore.”

Miss Lin did not know whether to laugh or cry. “We’re already at this point, and you’re still saying stuff like that?”

She glanced at the time, prompting them, “Check your costumes again, it’s time to go backstage for makeup.”

To express the image of the god of the earth, brown was the main color of the costumes. As the only boy, Jiang Shen did not need to wear a nude-colored leotard top, just baring his chest instead. The makeup artist painted colorful images on his chest and back, and together with his face, the amount of work that went into his makeup was a lot greater than Song Xin’s.

Song Xin was acting as the female half of the god of the earth, and her costume had an additional long skirt with colorful feathers to represent a hawk.

“Do you want to try wearing it?” Song Xin rested her head on her hand, watching as Jiang Shen had his makeup done. “This skirt is tied on, so it’s adjustable. It’ll fit regardless of male or female, large or small.”

The makeup artist was putting eyeliner on Jiang Shen. The boy was a little nervous, not daring to move at all. “You look better in it.”

Song Xin spun around. “It’s alright…” She watched the makeup artist seriously, and said sternly, “*Laoshi*, please make him look amazing. He’s our only male lead!”

Jiang Shen had no response to that.

There were already quite a number of people in the seats. Qingling-*zi* had saved seats for everyone earlier, and when she saw her brother and Shen Shubao, she waved vigorously at them. “Over here! Over here!”

In Shen Shubao’s hands was popcorn, while Chen Maoxiu was holding bubble tea. While walking over, they asked, “Are there enough seats? Our parents are still on their way.”

Qingling-*zi* patted her chest proudly. “I saved this entire row already!”

Just as she finished speaking, two more people suddenly appeared in the row she was pointing at. Like a little mountain, Lai Song sat down, and when he looked up, his eyes met Qingling-*zi*’s.

Qingling-*zi* was stunned.

Lai Song was surprised.

Goumao leaned over, and seeing Lai Song’s reaction, he was a little wary. “You know each other?”

Lai Song blinked. Just as he was about to answer, Qingling-*zi* cut him off. “No!”

Lai Song could only say, “We’re Jiang Shen’s friends.”

Goumao and Shen Shubao exchanged a look, then spoke simultaneously, “Bai Jinyi?!”

Richie Rich Bai, who had just been named, looked over from behind Lai Song. Upon seeing Goumao and the others, he nodded slightly. “Hello.”

His greeting was free and easy, but the three villagers were left shocked and completely disoriented.

Who was Bai Jinyi?! That was Jiang Shen's legendary 'charitable patron'! Whether it was food or clothes, were any of those things unrelated to Bai Jinyi?! Unfortunately, Jiang Shen was foolish; he only had WeChat installed on his iPhone, and he even wore clothes that cost five-digits into the paddy fields to work…

The people in the village lived simply, and wouldn't think too much of it. All of them secretly thought that Jiang Shen should receive such charitable aid anyways, and it was nothing to marvel over. After all, the Jiang family wasn't large, and they received less land because of it. Jiang Luoshan's back had been injured years ago, and the medical expenses had nearly bankrupted them. Both the husband and wife were good people, pushing through despite all the difficulties. Now that there was a kind soul helping them out, the Chen and Shen families were all thankful as well. Besides, Jiang Shen was the sort to repay a drop of water with a river, and anytime he had anything nice, he would mail it over to Bai Jinyi immediately.

Goumao and Shen Shubao had privately speculated many times about what sort of person Bai Jinyi was. Although Jiang Shen always said that they were just friends, with the things they gave to each other as just children… Was this Bai Jinyi someone with more money than sense?!

Today, this person with more money than sense really came, sitting breezily in the same row as them with his legs crossed.

As such, the three wild village puppies straightened their backs unconsciously, sitting upright in their seats.

"There's no need to be so reserved, everyone." Lai Song's foolishness could sometimes be beneficial. For example, this battlefield was like a field of flowers to him. "We're all friends here, we're all friends!"

Qingling-*zi* snuck a glance at Bai Jinyi, and said quietly, sounding envious, "His watch is so pretty…"

Goumao feigned calmness. "Don't talk to me about it, I don't understand."

Shen Shubao remained motionless, his eyes fixed to the front as his lips parted and closed. "His watch is worth two years of our entire village's harvest."

With a thud, Goumao fell to the ground along with his chair.

Extremely embarrassed, Qingling-*zi* hurried to help him up.

"Composure!" Shen Shubao scolded him sternly. "Where's our villagers' dignity?!"

With a grimace, Goumao asked, "What dignity…"

Shen Shubao raised a brow proudly. "The dignity of poor people!"

As they cultivated their poor people's dignity, the audience gradually filled up with people. Actually, other than Bai Jinyi, there was no one else in the crowd that was rich enough to devastate someone. Seeing that such Chosen Children were few and far between, Goumao and the others felt more settled.

Even if their families were not at the level of owning mines, they were at least happy and healthy.

The first half of the show had children singing and playing musical instruments. Quite a number of times, the sharp-eyed Qingling-*zi* noticed violinists getting called over to one side just after finishing their piece and leaving the stage.

She had studied in the Children's Center before, and knew what that meant. With great anticipation and nervousness, she waited for Jiang Shen's performance.

Another performance ended, and looking at the program, Lai Song exclaimed, "Little Swan's performance is the finale? How splendid."

Bai Jinyi did not speak, but his originally slouched posture was now straightened. His palms were slightly warm, and he rested them on his knees, taking a few deep breaths.

The MC left the stage after introducing the performance. Before the curtains even lifted, Goumao could no longer sit still. He stood up suddenly, shouting, "Shen-*zi*! Break a leg!"

No matter how Qingling-*zi* tried, she couldn't pull him back down. "Do you think this is a sports meet or something?!"

Chen Maoxiu was still struggling away from her grip. "I'm trying to make him less nervous!"

Shen Shubao was speechless. "You're only going to make him more nervous."

Naturally, Jiang Shen heard Goumao's earth-shattering yell. He was right up in the first row, and couldn't help but pull a corner of the curtain aside, peeking down at the audience.

From behind him, Song Xin leaned forward, asking quietly, "Your friends are all here?"

"Mn." Jiang Shen nodded. "This is the first time I'm dancing for them."

Song Xin smiled. "My parents are here too." She paused, before continuing softly, "But this will be the last time I'm dancing for them."

Jiang Shen looked back at Song Xin, somewhat startled.

"I'm already in my third year of junior high." There didn't seem to be any regret in Song Xin's expression. She said lightly, "After this performance, I won't be dancing anymore. I'll attend school properly, then move on to high school and university."

The curtains rose slowly. The first beam of light landed on the stage, looking like the glow of a full moon.

Music started playing. Song Xin prepared for the first beat. She stood next to Jiang Shen, holding the boy's hand tightly.

Jiang Shen looked at her. The girl was like a graceful hawk, flying into that patch of moonlight.

★

With a wave of both hands from the god of the earth, the seasons appeared; with a stamp of both feet, the land rose. They had rivers and lakes in their eyes, and built mountains and forests.

The drawings on the youth's chest and back were like flames, lighting his flesh and soul on fire.

As the beats of the drums increased, the god of the earth almost seemed to break through the land, mountains, and rivers. The youth's arms rose high above his head, and with one leap, it was as though he drew out the red sun.

Qingling-*zi* covered her mouth to prevent herself from screaming. With reddened eyes, she looked at her brother. Chen Maoxiu was sniffling away, ignoring how his tears had already rolled down to his chin.

Miss Lin was talking to a slightly older gentleman. The latter nodded; his eyes fixed on the stage.

After completing two grand jetés, Jiang Shen finally finished the first act. He left the stage hurriedly, passing the group dancers who were playing the crowd for the second act. The makeup artist rushed over to touch up his sweat-mussed body paint.

Song Xin was so happy, she was a little choked up. "Your dancing… was too good."

The makeup artist laughed. "Don't cry, my little female lead. If you ruin your makeup, how are you going to go onstage for the third act?"

Song Xin laughed through her sniffles and bent down, checking Jiang Shen's ballet shoes. "Later, we'll do some stretches. Relax, we'll…"

"Ah!" The makeup artist suddenly exclaimed. "How did you rip your pants?!"

On reflex, Jiang Shen turned to look. Just as what the makeup artist had said, there was a large split along his thigh, and the threads seemed to have snapped. Song Xin crouched down hurriedly, pinching the split closed, and asked urgently, "Does anyone have any thread? Can we sew it?"

The makeup artist said helplessly, "With such a large split, even if you sewed it shut, it will split again once he starts dancing. Don't you guys have spare pants?"

Song Xin bit her lip. "These costumes were custom-made. Jiang Shen's the only boy, so there are no extras…"

Frowning, Jiang Shen thought for a moment, then grit his teeth. "I'll just dance in my practice pants then."

Song Xin shook her head. "There are so many renowned teachers watching in the audience. We can't be so casual."

On stage, they were already halfway through the second act. Burning with anxiety, Jiang Shen turned around, wanting to grab the pants he usually wore for practice, only to be stopped by Song Xin.

Jiang Shen was startled.

“Let me ask you.” Song Xin’s hand on Jiang Shen was trembling slightly. “Are you familiar with the movements for the female lead role?”

Although he did not know why Song Xin was suddenly asking, Jiang Shen still nodded his head obediently. He consoled her, “I’ll just dance in my practice pants. As long as I dance well, Miss Lin will definitely be satisfied.”

Song Xin shook her head. She fell silent for a few moments, before continuing quietly, “We’re not dancing for Miss Lin.”

Jiang Shen furrowed his brows. He clearly did not understand what Song Xin meant.

“Jiang Shen.” Song Xin took a breath. Abruptly, she said decisively, “You will definitely be selected by a famous teacher!”

Shocked, Jiang Shen shook his head. “How’s that possible? I’m still young, and I’ve only been dancing for three years.”

“This has nothing to do with how many years you’ve danced. You have talent; you have more talent than me, than anyone here.”

Once she was done, she was not concerned about Jiang Shen’s reaction at all. She suddenly undid her feather skirt and wrapped it swiftly around Jiang Shen. With her head bowed, Song Xin tied it around his waist as she said softly, “When you go onstage, dance your portion first, then wait for a quarter of a beat. Once you hear the drums, dance my portion. You must kick the skirt up high. You’ve never practiced with the skirt before, so once you’re actually on stage, you have to remember that. It will only look good if you kick it up high.”

Jiang Shen was clearly stunned. He didn’t even react until his waist started to hurt from how tight Song Xin was tying the knot. He struggled fiercely, trying to undo it, but didn’t expect Song Xin to tie a double knot. No matter how hard Jiang Shen tried, he was unable to undo it. He was so anxious, he broke out into a sweat and asked, “Then what about you?! You have to go onstage as well! You’ll definitely get picked by famous teachers as well!”

Song Xin gripped both of Jiang Shen’s hands tightly. She looked into the boy’s eyes, breaking into a smile. “I know I’m not meant to be a dancer, but I like dancing. It’s always been my dream.”

Jiang Shen panted as he looked at Song Xin, his eyes slowly turning red.

Song Xin wiped her face. Her makeup was already smudged, but her smile was very beautiful. “Perhaps there are some people who may never achieve their dreams, but it’s alright.”

“It has accompanied me for a very, very long time. Even if there’s a day where I can’t dance anymore, it still won’t ever leave me.”

Song Xin reached out, pointing at her own chest. “It’ll always be right here.”

★

The hawk's feathers were a riot of colors. Jiang Shen pointed his toes sharply, standing up on them, before falling back down again, then kicked up the edges of his whirling skirt. His waist was supple, his turning arms full of strength and beauty.

Sitting in the audience, Lai Song was already entranced, and asked slowly, "Little Swan… is a girl?"

Bai Jinyi gazed at the person onstage. A beat later, he finally spoke up, "He's dancing Song Xin's part."

"Oh right!" Lai Song came to a realization. He furrowed his brows. "Where's Xinxin-*mei*?"

Bai Jinyi did not respond. The youth onstage was about to finish his dance. Miss Lin stood up in great excitement, leading the applause, and there was no need to even mention Jiang Shen's three little friends. Qingling-*zi* had already cried herself hoarse, and her hands were red from clapping.

Jiang Shen straightened up, and the other dancers stepped onto the stage as well to take the curtain call. A few of the teachers in the first row also stood up, giving him a standing ovation.

As the applause never ended, Jiang Shen had to bow three separate times before he could finally leave the stage.

Song Xin was already waiting for him. Seeing him, she was so emotional, she couldn't speak for a good while.

"I remembered what you told me," Jiang Shen said seriously. "To kick the skirt up high, so that it would look good."

Song Xin's tears nearly fell again. She sniffled, smiling, "You danced so well."

Jiang Shen wanted to say something else, but suddenly heard Miss Lin call his name in the distance. Just as he hesitated, Song Xin gave him a firm push. "Go!"

Dawdling, Jiang Shen slowly made his way towards Miss Lin, turning back to look at Song Xin every few steps.

Miss Lin looked at him warmly. "You danced extremely well today, especially the female part at the end. You managed to show off your advantages completely."

Even though Jiang Shen was praised often, he still could not help but blush. He said haltingly, "It was Song Xin who taught me to dance like that. Today, she…"

"Song Xin has already spoken to me," Miss Lin interrupted him. She shifted to one side, then introduced a young man behind her. "This is the representative of the Northern school of contemporary dance, Mr. Zhou."

Jiang Shen looked over, a little muddle-headed. Mr. Zhou did not look very old. He was very fair, his charming eyes brilliant and entrancing. Smiling slightly, Mr. Zhou crouched down a little, so that Jiang Shen could look at him more easily.

“My name is Zhou Luoxiang, and you can call me Mr. Zhou.” Mr. Zhou’s voice was very pleasant, and the way he spoke was also very gentle. “You’re Jiang Shen, right?”

Jiang Shen nodded.

“If you want to continue learning dance, would you like to learn from me?”

Jiang Shen opened his mouth. He was clearly at a loss for what to do, and he unconsciously turned to look at Miss Lin. The latter encouraged him, “You can make your own decision. Once you’ve decided, I’ll help you talk to your parents.”

“There’s no hurry.” Zhou Luoxiang smiled. He took a box of business cards from his suit pocket, retrieved one, and handed it to Jiang Shen. “You can go home and consider it slowly. Once you’ve decided, you can come find me.”

Jiang Shen hesitated for some time, but still accepted the business card in the end. Zhou Luoxiang was only put at ease after seeing him accept it. He straightened up, ruffling the boy’s hair. “Don’t forget, I’ll be waiting for your call.”

From the business card, Zhou Luoxiang clearly had many titles. Jiang Shen looked at the long list, realizing that he did not recognize many. He only felt that the scent on the card was very overwhelming. Turning, he left to look for Song Xin, who clearly knew a lot more than him.

“The Northern Zhou and the Southern Shen!” She cupped her face with her hands, endlessly envious. “It’s Zhou Luoxiang!”

Jiang Shen was baffled. “Is he very famous?”

Song Xin’s eyes were round. “Of course! Between him and Shen Junyi, they swept up almost all the major international ballet awards in the last ten years. However, Zhou Luoxiang is Shen Junyi’s junior, and the two of them have an age gap of eight years. Considering the peak age of a dancer, Shen Junyi has already started to decline. Now, Zhou Luoxiang is only inches away from the title of ‘Number One Ballet Dancer’.

Jiang Shen thought about it. “He’s so thin.”

“He has a different style.” Song Xin was armed with knowledge about him. “His contemporary dance style seeks the pinnacle of feminine beauty. Do you want to learn from him?”

Jiang Shen glanced at her. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Then just take your time.” Song Xin pushed him over to the dressing table. She grabbed the makeup remover, shaking it lightly. “I’ll help you wipe off the body paint.”

The cool makeup remover dripping onto his back felt a little strange. Hugging his legs, Jiang Shen rested his chin on his knees.

He could not help but ask, “Song Xin, you really won’t dance anymore?”

Holding a cotton pad, Song Xin wiped at his back bit by bit. “I won’t be taking any more classes, but I can still dance as a hobby.” She looked at Jiang Shen’s reflection

in the mirror. “Didn’t I say it before? My dream will always remain.”

Jiang Shen didn’t say anything. When Song Xin was halfway done with his back, the ‘audience' waiting outside could no longer hold themselves back, and burst in.

The moment Qingling-*zi* saw Jiang Shen, she wailed, bursting into tears.

Jiang Shen was completely baffled. “W-what’s wrong?!”

Qingling-*zi* sobbed, “Y-your dancing… was t-too beautiful.”

Jiang Shen was at a loss for words.

He looked towards Goumao and Shubao, only to realize that their eyes were also red…

Lai Song had no choice but to lighten the atmosphere. He nudged the three silly villagers out of the room. “We’re going to get a table somewhere first to celebrate Little Swan’s performance. Xinxin-*mei*, join us!”

Song Xin looked at Jiang Shen. “Will you be able to remove the rest yourself?”

Just as Jiang Shen was about to nod, he heard Bai Jinyi say placidly, “I’ll help him with it.”

He accepted the cotton pad and makeup remover from Song Xin, and raised a brow at Jiang Shen. “Besides, it’s not the first time I’m helping you remove your makeup.”

The images on his back were cleaned up quickly, but for the ones on his chest, Jiang Shen was a little shy. “I’ll do it myself.”

Bai Jinyi dodged him childishly. “Why? You don’t trust my skills?”

Jiang Shen said awkwardly, “No… It’s just that I can see it, so I can do it myself.”

“But I can see it too,” Bai Jinyi answered.

Jiang Shen was speechless. He wondered, *where did Bai Jinyi learn to speak so shamelessly?*

“Alright,” Jiang Shen complied good-naturedly. He puffed up his chest, and said seriously, “Go ahead.”

Bai Jinyi leaned in very close, meticulously wiping the paintings near his collarbones. Looking down, Jiang Shen could see the whorl in Bai Jinyi’s hair. Gazing at it for a while, he could not help but ask, “Did I dance well today?”

Bai Jinyi glanced up at him. “So many people have praised you already. Didn’t you hear them?”

Jiang Shen mumbled, “But you haven’t yet…”

Bai Jinyi laughed. “I’m uncultured; I can’t think of any better phrases to praise you with.”

Jiang Shen froze for a second, then joy bubbled up within him. Not giving up, he said, “Try thinking of some more?”

Using his forehead, Bai Jinyi bumped Jiang Shen’s chin impatiently. “You’re so annoying.”

Jiang Shen finally settled down, but the delight in his heart could not be contained.

Bai Jinyi wiped very slowly. Near Jiang Shen's chest, he applied more makeup remover. "But how did you end up dancing Song Xin's part today?"

As soon as that was brought up, Jiang Shen's expression dimmed once more, and he sighed quietly.

"Bai Jinyi, tell me." Jiang Shen looked at him. "What exactly is a dream?"

Tilting his head, Bai Jinyi glanced at Jiang Shen, but his hands never paused. "Why are you suddenly asking that?"

"Song Xin said she couldn't continue holding onto her dream of dancing, so she decided to stop taking classes. But she also said even if she's no longer taking classes, her dream will still always accompany her. Is that true?"

Bai Jinyi pondered over it for some time, before answering honestly, "Actually, I have no idea as well."

He dragged a stool over, sitting in front of Jiang Shen. Reaching out, he slowly undid the feather skirt around him. "My dream is to box. I will continue boxing until I reach the professional stage and win the national lightweight or welterweight championship. Then, I'll fight my way into the international arena, and win the boxing champion's gold belt."

Although Jiang Shen did not really understand the context, he felt that what Bai Jinyi was talking about was something that was very, very important and amazing.

Bai Jinyi undid his skirt, picked up the cotton pad again, and wiped at the paintings around his waist. "But I also know that the peak period of a boxer is not long. I might box into my thirties, then stop." He paused, before continuing, "But even so, I wouldn't feel that I didn't hold onto my dream."

Bai Jinyi looked up and said, "It's all clean now."

"Ah," Jiang Shen exclaimed, looking down at his own clean skin.

Bai Jinyi brought his shirt over, and commanded, "Lift up your arms."

Jiang Shen lifted his arms obediently.

After putting his shirt on for him, Bai Jinyi crouched down again to remove Jiang Shen's ballet shoes. Due to the many years of ballet practice, the arches of Jiang Shen's feet were a lot higher than others. Even when placed flat on the ground, there was an obvious curve in the soles of his feet.

"Does it hurt?" Bai Jinyi asked suddenly, holding onto his foot.

"It doesn't hurt once you've gotten used to it." Jiang Shen shook his head. However, he was rather disdainful of his feet. "They're just really ugly."

Bai Jinyi did not respond, only putting his shoes on for him.

“My hands don’t look good either.” Bai Jinyi showed him the backs of his hands. “See? They’re full of scars, the kind that will never disappear.”

“So, Little Swan, it’s okay to be ugly.” Bai Jinyi looked at him, breaking into a smile. “Let’s be ugly together.”

No matter how many years pass, Jiang Shen would always remember that what he believed to be his dream finally turned into something concrete that day.

It had transformed into the wind among the fields, and the rain between the hills. It was the dance studio, sleepy and lazy in the spring; the little girls in their flowered skirts; the dim, yellow light by the entrance of the book shop; and two eggs in his lunchbox.

As well as Bai Jinyi’s scarred hands.

It was like the stars, racing across their lives and the passing of time, engraving themselves into the bright, splendid galaxy to come.

Chapter 6 — The Path to Learning

After the show, Bai Jinyi had a few days of break before he once again had to resume training. He took a few photos of Bai'er, sending them to Jiang Shen. Jiang Shen thought about it, then sent him a photo of Tony in return.

Goumao and Shen Shubao were sitting on the ridge by the fields, fishing for loaches. The two boys had removed their shoes, their feet dangling in the ditch.

"Will you not be going to junior high anymore?" Chen Maoxiu was holding onto a fishing rod. The three boys were sitting in a row, with Jiang Shen in the middle.

Jiang Shen nodded. "Once I find a professional ballet teacher who's willing to teach me, I won't be attending school anymore. I'll be completely focused on ballet."

Goumao sighed. "How nice. I don't want to go to school either."

Shen Shubao snorted. "If you don't go to school, what can you do? Farm in the fields?"

"You're speaking as though you've already decided what *you* want to do." Waving the rod, Chen Maoxiu feigned hitting Shen Shubao with it. "You only know how to study!"

Reaching past Jiang Shen, Shen Shubao kicked Goumao off the ridge and into the water. "Ordinary people should study, go to university, then work, understand? You can't even do the first step. What, you don't want to be an ordinary person? You think you're a child of the heavens?"

Goumao was at a loss for words.

Jiang Shen watched helplessly as his two older brothers tussled about, chasing each other across the fields, mutually trying their best to kick the water from the ditch into each other's faces… He sighed, taking off his shoes and making his way down into the field.

"Stop fighting!" Jiang Shen shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth. "If the adults see us, they're going to scold us again!"

Neither Shen Shubao nor Chen Maoxiu paid him any attention.

With his hands on his waist, Jiang Shen could only watch them fool around.

The summer sun in the village was scorching, and beads of sweat were rolling down Jiang Shen's face. Even under the shade of the trees, it was not that much cooler. Taking advantage of the cool water in the ditch, he rubbed at his calves, and when he looked up again, he saw a stranger standing by the field, looking at him.

That person was obviously not from the village or the county. The white shirt and black pants he wore were clearly made from expensive silk, and only the canvas

shoes on his feet could be considered plain.

“Jiang Shen?” That man suddenly called his name.

Jiang Shen nodded as a greeting, and asked warily, “You are…?”

The man’s eyes fell to his feet. Furrowing his brows, he spoke, his voice icy and low, “Did your teacher never teach you that a dancer’s feet are their life?”

Jiang Shen was speechless.

With an ethereal bearing, Shen Junyi sat in the living room of the Jiang family’s house.

Unlike Zhou Luoxiang, Shen Junyi was taller. He did not look like a man about to turn forty at all. His hair was cut very short, his nose tall and straight, and his almond-shaped eyes were long and sharp.

Tan Lingling was very careful even when pouring him a glass of water. The couple stood by the side, not daring to share the table with him at all.

Jiang Shen stood cautiously in front of him.

Shen Junyi had an arm resting on the table. He rarely smiled, and looked very stern. “Take your shoes off.”

Jiang Shen did not know what he wanted to do, but he still obediently removed the ballet shoes that he had just put on.

Shen Junyi waved his hand. “Come here.”

Jiang Shen walked over.

Placing a hand on his shoulder, Shen Junyi made Jiang Shen turn around. His palm pressed carefully along the boy’s back and waist, and his eyes fell onto Jiang Shen’s legs.

“Demi plié,” Shen Junyi commanded.

Reflexively, Jiang Shen bent his knees into the requested position.

“Grand plié.”

Jiang Shen followed his instructions accordingly.

After some silence, Shen Junyi instructed, “Stand up.”

Jiang Shen straightened. A little confused, he looked at Shen Junyi, then turned to Tan Lingling and Jiang Luoshan.

Shen Junyi seemed to be contemplating something for a while. He then turned to Jiang Shen's parents and said, "I'd like to speak with you."

If Jiang Shen were to go to Shanghai to pursue ballet professionally, Shen Junyi would arrange for his lodgings and schooling. However, the yearly fee of being his student was not cheap. Also, once he was there, he would have to listen to Shen Junyi on every matter, and his life there would be hard and boring.

After listing out his conditions, Shen Junyi asked Jiang Shen, "If you have any requests, you can ask me now."

Jiang Shen thought for a moment. "Zhou Luoxiang, Mr. Zhou, has spoken to me as well."

Shen Junyi paused. He looked at the boy with his almond-shaped eyes, his face rather expressionless. "You show great promise, so it's not surprising that he also came to you. As for him and I…" Another pause, and the corner of Shen Junyi's mouth quirked up, revealing a disdainful smile. "He's not worthy of being mentioned in the same breath as me yet."

Tan Lingling and Jiang Luoshan walked Shen Junyi out of the yard. Jiang Shen followed behind, and before he left, Shen Junyi suddenly asked him, "How long have you been raising that rooster of yours?"

Although Jiang Shen did not understand why asked, he still replied honestly, "Over two years."

Shen Junyi nodded. Finally, he glanced at Jiang Shen and said, "Consider it properly, I'll be waiting for your call."

Although they were his parents, in regards to professional ballet, Tan Lingling and Jiang Luoshan were unable to provide any help at all. As a mother with vital interest in her child's future, Tan Lingling was a little more anxious.

"That Mr. Zhou you mentioned," Tan Lingling asked her son as she deboned a chicken, "what will the conditions be like? Is everything included? How much will tuition be for a year?"

Jiang Shen shook his head. "He didn't say that much."

Tan Lingling sighed. "If we grit our teeth, we'll still be able to come up with the school fees…"

Jiang Shen mumbled, "It's too expensive…"

Furrowing his brows, Jiang Luoshan rebuked him. "What's too expensive? You don't have to worry about this, just think about which teacher you'd like to learn from."

Tan Lingling was troubled. "That Mr. Shen looks very strict to me. He won't beat his students, right?"

“Didn’t the old opera masters beat their disciples as well? They won’t grow without any beatings.” Jiang Luoshan was not troubled at all.

Tan Lingling glared at him. “What nonsense are you saying? What age are we in now? Which child isn’t a treasure to their parents?” She thought for a moment, then asked her son, “What about that Mr. Zhou then? What is he like? Is he good-tempered?”

Jiang Shen recalled, “His temper should be better than Mr. Shen…”

Tan Lingling was again conflicted, and she sighed heavily.

Jiang Shen also told Bai Jinyi about choosing a teacher over the phone, and the other boy was quite straightforward about it.

“I don’t like that Zhou Luoxiang.”

Jiang Shen asked curiously, “Why?”

“That day at your show, he was seated in front of me. He wore such heavy makeup and even held his handkerchief in front of his nose the whole time, just like a girl.”

Jiang Shen said timidly, “… I even danced while wearing a skirt. Isn’t that girlier…”

“You’re different.” Bai Jinyi held them to different standards, completely biased. “You’re a little swan, of course little swans can wear skirts.”

Jiang Shen was baited into laughing.

“Also, if you choose Shen Junyi, you will be able to come to Shanghai.” Bai Jinyi’s tone sounded a little conceited. “I’m also in Shanghai.”

Jiang Shen could not help but ask, “Then, is it tough for you every day?”

“When has boxing not been tough?” After a pause, Bai Jinyi continued, “But it’s probably not as tough as what you do.”

Jiang Shen thought for a while, then said seriously, “How’s that possible? I’m not getting beaten up every day. You definitely have it tougher.”

Bai Jinyi was at a loss for words.

The two boys chatted for a little while more. Bai Jinyi suddenly remembered something, and asked, “Do you want to come over next weekend?”

“Why?”

“Our gym is holding a friendly competition, and I’ve signed up for the youth lightweight category. You and Lai Song can come together and watch.”

“Really?!” Jiang Shen’s eyes were bright. He asked excitedly, “Will you be in the ring?”

Bai Jinyi snorted. “I’ve signed up, of course I’ll be in the ring. Come watch me box, then stay over at my place for the night, and we’ll hang out together in Shanghai for a few days.”

Jiang Shen was clearly attracted to the words ‘hang out’. He asked, full of yearning, “Is Shanghai fun?”

Bai Jinyi laughed lightly “I’m here, of course it’ll be fun.”

The train ticket to Shanghai could only be booked in the city. Jiang Shen got Lai Song to buy the ticket with him a day ahead. Before heading off, he felt even more nervous than when he had to go on stage.

“Should I make a banner for him?” Jiang Shen asked on the train.

Lai Song looked baffled. “What banner?”

Jiang Shen gestured, saying seriously, “The sort of encouraging banners you see during sports meets! We’ll buy a few horns as well, and once Bai Jinyi is in the ring, we’ll blow them together.”

Holding his belly, Lai Song nearly died laughing. “It’s just a little friendly competition within a boxing gym. It’s not a big deal. With the way you think, once he participates in the youth national competition, would you have to buy a big, neon advertisement to cheer him on?”

Jiang Shen was shocked. He waved his hands hurriedly, saying honestly, “No, no, I’m too poor, I can’t afford that.”

Lai Song was speechless. “I was only just saying, you don’t have to take me so seriously.”

Jiang Shen could not grasp the flow of the conversation at all.

The boxing gym Bai Jinyi trained at was located in Chongming District, and a very famous cycling race was held there annually. Of course, this was something Lai Song found on the internet before he told Jiang Shen about it.

Once the two boys got off the train, they were driven to the boxing gym by the Bai family chauffeur. Compared to Jiang Shen’s reservedness and cautiousness, Lai Song was completely carefree the whole way there, fitting into the scene perfectly.

Before seeing Bai Jinyi, quite a number of people came to greet Lai Song.

“I was the first runner-up in last year’s youth heavyweight championship.” Lai Song looked at Jiang Shen, a little pleased with himself. “Most of them recognize me.”

For the first time, Jiang Shen looked at him in admiration.

Lai Song enjoyed it very much and pointed at himself. “I’m a senior, got it? A senior.”

Jiang Shen asked, “Then, did the champion come today?”

Lai Song froze for a moment. His smile disappeared as he snorted lightly, a little scornful. “He knows I’m coming, so he won’t be here.”

Jiang Shen looked at him questioningly.

Lai Song sat down by the sidelines, patting the seat next to him, signalling Jiang Shen to sit.

“Boxing is not like ballet.” When Lai Song became serious, his expression was different from Bai Jinyi’s. He looked more like an adult, and his youthful brows seemed to be laden with years of frost and snow.

“Our fists,” he laughed, waving his hand, “are a lot filthier than your ballet shoes.”

★

Since it was a friendly competition, the rules were not as strict. All protective gear would be worn, and there would only be four rounds per match. Each round would last three minutes, and between each round was a one minute break. Lai Song had already reviewed all this information with Jiang Shen earlier, but as for how the winner was determined, Jiang Shen was still fixated on the idea that the match could only be concluded with a ‘KO’.

“How could that be?” Lai Song laughed. “No one is so impressive that they can KO their opponent every match. Besides, Bai Jinyi is in the lightweight category. For them, their scores are calculated based on the points they amass each round. At the end of the match, whoever has the highest score wins.”

Jiang Shen then asked, “How do they score points then?”

“They will need to strike these areas.” Lai Song pointed at his own body. “The front of the head, the face, the neck, the chest, the ribs, and the abdomen.” He then drew a line around his waist. “In any case, they’re all above the belt.”

Listening to him, Jiang Shen looked very concerned. “It must be very painful… What happens if someone gets injured?”

“This is boxing.” Lai Song did not know to laugh or cry. “Do you think it’s like ballet, where everything just needs to look beautiful?”

“To us, the scars are our medals, the blood and sweat our commendation.” Lai Song hung off the ropes around the boxing ring. He turned towards Jiang Shen and winked at him. “And the punches thrown are the highest accolades of all.”

In the locker room, Bai Jinyi was wrapping his hands. Across him sat a Caucasian coach with a straight nose and deep-set eyes, and standing next to them was an interpreter.

The coach said something, then the interpreter translated. Bai Jinyi nodded in agreement. When the interpreter left, the coach finally could not help himself, and asked in poor Mandarin, “You- learn English, OK?”

With his head lowered, Bai Jinyi answered, “Not OK. No time. You learn Mandarin.”

The coach was speechless.

Bai Jinyi really wasn't arguing for the sake of arguing. In his mind, boxing was his number one priority, and anything else that was a waste of time had to be pushed back.

The coach had no other choice; after all, his Mandarin still wasn't good enough. He could only call the interpreter back, and the two talked away, telling Bai Jinyi how he should fight later. Bai Jinyi listened very seriously. Done wrapping his hands, he stood up, practicing a few basic dodging moves, and finally bent over, removing his top.

Someone outside knocked on the door. “Young Master, Mr. Lai and Mr. Jiang are here.”

Pulling his gloves on, Bai Jinyi answered, “Alright.”

This was the first time Jiang Shen heard someone calling another person 'Young Master', and he felt as though he was filming a drama. Lai Song, however, was used to it. Entering the locker room, he wasn’t overly courteous, walking up and bumping fists with Bai Jinyi.

“You’re here?” Bai Jinyi looked at Jiang Shen. Seated on the couch, he waved at the boy. “Come.”

With a questioning look, Jiang Shen walked over.

Bai Jinyi extended his hand. As he was wearing his boxing glove, Jiang Shen did not think too much of it, and prepared to bump fists with him, like what Lai Song did.

“Put your hand on top.” Bai Jinyi did not bump his fist. He pursed his lips and instructed, “Put it on top of my boxing glove.”

Jiang Shen did not really understand, but he still followed Bai Jinyi’s instructions accordingly. Inhaling deeply, Bai Jinyi suddenly lowered his head, pressing his forehead into Jiang Shen’s hand that was on top of his glove.

Jiang Shen was surprised.

With his eyes closed, Bai Jinyi said sternly, “A prayer before the fight.”

Shocked, Jiang Shen glanced at Lai Song and the coach reflexively. Everyone looked like they were used to it, and that this was nothing strange. Clearly, this was a default ritual that had to be performed before each match.

Of course, Jiang Shen dared not slack off on such an important matter. Copying Bai Jinyi, he bowed his head as well, closing his eyes and murmuring softly with a serious expression, “I hope you come back safely.”

Bai Jinyi was at a loss for words.

Jiang Shen still had his eyes shut, chanting away as though he was casting a spell, “Come back safe come back safe come back safe…”

Lai Song was nearly on the floor from trying to hold back his laughter. Resigned, Bai Jinyi raised his fist, nudging Jiang Shen’s forehead lightly. “You should pray that I’ll defeat my opponent.”

Jiang Shen covered his forehead, explaining, “T-that’s not important… As long as you’re not injured…”

Chuckling, Bai Jinyi hooked his gloved hand around the back of Jiang Shen’s head. “Got it, Little Swan.”

A middleweight match had just concluded in the ring. Standing outside the ropes, Jiang Shen leaned forward, looking at the scene for quite some time. He only felt his heart settle back down a little closer to his stomach after not finding blood on the ground. Lai Song stood next to him, reminding him, “Later, just stand right here. Get a little closer, and don’t get pushed behind.”

Jiang Shen asked curiously, “Are there no seats for the audience?”

“Why would a boxing match need seats? Just stand and watch. As long as you don’t go past the ropes, it’ll be fine. That’s why you have to try to stand as close to the ring as possible, and exert pressure on the opposing side.”

Lai Song pointed at the opposite corner. “Do you see that group of people there? They’re the friends and relatives of Bai Jinyi’s opponent, and they will be exerting pressure on us as well.”

Just as Jiang Shen was about to ask what this ‘pressure’ was, he saw a few boys across from them giving them a thumbs-down sign simultaneously, as though they had discussed it.

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Lai Song laughed. “And that’s why your banners and horns are all useless. Men need to be like this!” He then jerked his arm up, raising his fist, and flicked out a middle finger towards them decisively!

Jiang Shen was even more speechless.

Lai Song had yet to put his middle finger down. “Quick, do it once just like me!”

Naturally, Jiang Shen didn’t copy him in making such an uncivilized gesture. The atmosphere in the gym was already simmering. Before the two opponents had even started, the friends and family of both sides were already brimming with the smell of gunpowder, especially since Bai Jinyi was quite well known in his gym, and he also had Lai Song, who took the lead in the aggression. Between the two parties, baskets of swearwords had already been thrown at each other.

Jiang Shen was squeezed tightly in the middle of several muscular men. Filling the air was the smell of salty sweat, along with the soaring hormones of the excited crowd. With a few people clustered around him, Bai Jinyi stepped into the ring. He pulled on his headgear and mouthguard, looking a little different than normal.

Right up against the ropes, Lai Song yelled almost savagely, “Beat him up!!!”

The surrounding crowd followed the flow as well, all shouting and yelling one after another. The referee in the ring gave a symbolic gesture for the crowd to quiet down, then signalled for the two opponents to touch each other’s gloves in greeting.

Jiang Shen had been squeezed up against the ring, the ropes right in front of his face. Because he was too close, he could even see the expressions of the fighters clearly.

While yelling, Lai Song nudged him. “Come on, shout!”

Jiang Shen only heard buzzing in his ears. He did not know what to shout, and was so anxious, his hands started to shake.

Bai Jinyi started circling. His opponent clearly had a much worse temper. It was as though he had been accumulating his rage for a long time, and threw the first punch. Because he danced, Jiang Shen’s dynamic visual acuity was quite good. As the opponent’s fist swept over, Jiang Shen instinctively shut his eyes tightly.

Bai Jinyi dodged the punch.

Grabbing the ropes, Lai Song shouted, “There are only four rounds! Three minutes each! Attack! Don’t be on the defensive!”

Bai Jinyi swiftly shifted his position, and landed a fist accurately on his opponent’s abdomen.

“Wow!” Jiang Shen exclaimed. He said excitedly, “He hit him, he hit him!”

Lai Song roared furiously, “Continue! Beat him up!”

Jiang Shen was again speechless.

From the side, Bai Jinyi threw another punch, hitting his opponent’s face. However, he did not guard his left side, and the opponent hit him in the ribs at the same time.

Jiang Shen could almost hear the sound of the impact of fist on flesh, yet Bai Jinyi acted like it was nothing. He only backed up a few steps, and started circling again.

“It’s fine, our score is higher,” Lai Song consoled. He did not hear Jiang Shen speak, and looked down reflexively. “Little Swan?”

Jiang Shen did not seem to have heard him. The boy looked at Bai Jinyi in the ring, as though facing his greatest enemy. When Bai Jinyi dodged to the left, Jiang Shen moved to the left with him. When Bai Jinyi moved right, Jiang Shen moved to the right as well. As soon as Bai Jinyi swung a fist, Jiang Shen would clench his fist tightly. Of course, when Bai Jinyi was hit, Jiang Shen’s expression was also very entertaining — looking so unbearably tragic, as though the sky had fallen.

“How much longer do they have to fight?” After Bai Jinyi had been struck a few more times, Jiang Shen finally could not help but ask.

Lai Song looked at the timer. “The first round is about to end. If a KO doesn’t happen, there will be a minute’s break before the second round starts.”

Jiang Shen bit his lip, not saying a word. Ten seconds later, the referee in the ring separated the two fighters.

Bai Jinyi sat down in front of the post. He removed his headgear, his fringe already soaked with sweat. His coach approached him, massaging to relax his muscles as the interpreter talked away, working hard. Bai Jinyi listened as he nodded, his eyes sweeping the edges of the ring.

Jiang Shen was looking right at him.

Bai Jinyi raised a brow, and started to arrange his hair.

The coach was speechless and said, “Stop showing off!”

Bai Jinyi said, “No way, there’s someone looking.”

The coach bore with it, and let the interpreter step forward. “Your score for the first round is very high, we just have to maintain the gap for the second round. Go more on the defensive, and don’t take the initiative to attack. Avoid the attacks in a defensive manner, then search for a flaw in the other party. You’ve improved greatly, well done.”

Bai Jinyi thought for a moment then said, “Can I KO the other party?”

The coach’s head hurt. “Why do you keep wanting to KO?!”

Bai Jinyi put his headgear back on. The one-minute break was about to end. “Because there’s someone watching today, so I must look cool.”

The coach was at a loss for words.

Just as the second round started, Jiang Shen could not help but ask Lai Song, “They have to fight for another three minutes?”

Lai Song nodded. “If there’s no KO, of course they have to use up all the time.”

Jiang Shen asked anxiously, “Then can they KO?”

“It’s very difficult for fighters in the flyweight and lightweight categories to KO their opponents,” Lai Song explained, “due to their weight, their punches are not as powerful. Also… Bai Jinyi’s opponent is a very dirty fighter, and it won’t be easy to KO him.”

Jiang Shen did not understand what it meant to be a dirty fighter. Lai Song sneered. “Watch carefully. During the first round, he didn’t play too many tricks. Now that they’re in the second round, he definitely won’t be able to hold himself back.”

★

The third time his foot was stepped on, Bai Jinyi narrowed his eyes slightly. It was common to play dirty tricks in professional matches, as long as they were not discovered by the referee. Stepping on the opponent's foot, deliberately jabbing the eyes when punching the face, elbowing below the belt, and even hitting the back of the head when the opponent was unaware—

"He fouled!" Outside the ring, Lai Song yelled at the referee. "It's the third time already! He's stepping on his foot!"

The referee stepped forward to separate the two fighters. Bai Jinyi was a little annoyed by the incessant harassment. During his year in the States, he had met opponents even worse than this, so when he faced such people in a match, he lost his temper easily.

The opponent clearly didn't care for the referee's warning, spreading his palms open and shrugging. The referee let the two opponents draw closer again and touch gloves, signalling for the match to continue.

"You don't look like much, but you're not that bad, huh." The opponent threw a verbal challenge with degrading words.

Bai Jinyi did not respond. He was searching for a hole in the opponent's defence.

"Is the one standing outside the ring your friend?" The opponent's tone was rather provoking. "He looks like he's about to cry, how cute."

Bai Jinyi frowned. Reflexively, he turned to look at Jiang Shen, only to feel pain radiating across his left cheek. Scattered, white light flashed before his eyes, and when he came back to himself, he had already been knocked into the ropes.

Jiang Shen was right behind him, and the boy's eyes were red. He kept shouting, "Bai Jinyi! Bai Jinyi!!"

Bai Jinyi tossed his head.

Jiang Shen wanted to help him up, but was held back by Lai Song.

"You can't touch him, that's against the rules." Lai Song shook his head. He shouted loudly, "Stand up, Bai Jinyi! It's only one point! Go beat him!"

Bai Jinyi spat out a mouthful of bloody spittle. The corner of his lips really hurt, and he did not need to look to know that it was split. The referee came up to see if he was fit to continue the match

Bai Jinyi waved him off.

Lai Song was shouting nonstop for Bai Jinyi to hit him back. Bai Jinyi stood up, positioning himself in an attacking stance.

"Oh? You can still fight?" The opponent clearly felt that the verbal challenges were very effective. "Your little boyfriend is watch—"

Before he could finish, Bai Jinyi's fist was already flying towards him!

The opponent did not climb back up right away after falling. The entire crowd was silent, and it took the referee a few seconds to react before he jumped up into the

ring hurriedly and started counting. Bai Jinyi could not be bothered to look at his opponent's condition. Removing his headgear, he spat his mouthguard out.

Lai Song was the first to react. Raising his hands up in the air, he shouted, "Five! Four! Three! Two! One! Zero—!"

The letters 'KO' appeared in red, capitalized letters on the huge timer above the ring. The crowd bubbled over with excitement, while Bai Jinyi removed his gloves and started to fix his hair earnestly.

Jiang Shen wanted to climb over the ropes, only to discover that there were too many people. He could not find even a crack to make his way through. Lai Song had already run into the centre of the ring, so he could only turn back to pull him up.

Except someone was already a step ahead of him.

Somehow, Bai Jinyi had managed to make his way through the wall of people. Crouching down by the edge of the ring, he stretched his hand out to Jiang Shen, who was trying his best to climb up.

"Was I cool?" Bai Jinyi asked expressionlessly.

Staring at the wound at the corner of his mouth, Jiang Shen responded loudly with a completely unrelated question. "Does it hurt?!"

Bai Jinyi was at a loss for words.

★

The punch Bai Jinyi took to the face had not been light at all. Although he had the protection of his mouthguard, and there was no damage to his molars, both the skin inside and outside of his lips were torn. The wound on the corner of his mouth even looked a little frightening, with how swollen it had become.

Other than arranging a housekeeper and interpreter for Bai Jinyi, the Bai family had also arranged for a personal doctor to accompany him. Dealing with a superficial wound like this was not troublesome at all. In the end, the doctor handed Bai Jinyi an ice pack, reminding him to apply it to his wound to reduce the swelling.

"I'll do it." Jiang Shen wrapped the ice pack in a towel, pressing it gently against Bai Jinyi's wound.

Standing to the side, Lai Song waited for the doctor to leave before finally asking, "Did you know that kid would be such a dirty fighter?"

Bai Jinyi tilted his head back, his glance sweeping across him. "How many people *don*'t fight dirty these days?"

Lai Song huffed angrily. "I don't!"

"And that's why you didn't win the championship."

Lai Song's expression turned ugly again. Jiang Shen looked at him, then looked back at Bai Jinyi. With a cautious expression, he asked, "What happened?"

“For the national youth heavyweight championship, Lai Song had already been the champion for three years. Boxing is a ladder competition. The opponent sent a challenge, and Lai Song accepted.” Bai Jinyi’s tone was very calm, it was hard to detect any righteous indignation in it. “It was a twelve round match, and Lai Song had amassed a lot of points. In the second last round, the opponent caught him off guard and struck the back of his head.”

Lai Song said resignedly, “Enough, don’t talk about it anymore. It’s all in the past.”

“What past?” Bai Jinyi sneered. “A heavyweight match, yet he struck at the back of your head. If he put a little more force into that punch, you would have died!”

Jiang Shen’s eyes widened. It was his first time hearing something like 'you would have died', and he was in disbelief. “Y-you didn’t call the police w-with that sort of foul?”

His words made Lai Song laugh. “Don’t listen to Richie Rich Bai. He’s a child and likes to exaggerate. How can a person die so easily?”

Bai Jinyi snorted mockingly. Lifting his chin, he rolled his eyes.

Lai Song ignored him. “I’ve got enough awards, and I can get extra points for the college entrance exam for being a sports specialty student. It’s not too bad.” He then fell silent for a bit, before mumbling to himself, “It’s not like I can actually box for the rest of my life.”

★

Only Bai Jinyi and Jiang Shen were left in the locker room. Lai Song had gone to collect the medal on Bai Jinyi’s behalf. According to him, as a heavyweight boxer, he could also go teach that lightweight brat a lesson at the same time.

Bai Jinyi let him go, closing his eyes and allowing Jiang Shen to hold the ice pack against his mouth.

After some time, the ice pack was bound to melt a little. Some droplets rolled down the corner of Bai Jinyi’s mouth to his neck, and Jiang Shen wiped them away with a towel.

Bai Jinyi’s skin was very fair. When his eyes were closed, his lashes were both thick and long, like two inky crow feathers. When he was quiet, he finally seemed like a boy of Jiang Shen’s age, and it was not at all an exaggeration to say that he looked obedient and delicate.

“What are you looking at?” Bai Jinyi asked suddenly, without opening his eyes.

Jiang Shen answered honestly, “I’m looking at you.”

Bai Jinyi squinted, one eye remaining closed. “Do I look good?”

Jiang Shen nodded. “Yes.”

Bai Jinyi wanted to hold in his laughter but did not manage, and his laughter broke through. Fortunately, the wound at the corner of his mouth still hurt. When he laughed, it tore at the wound, and he hissed in pain, helping him cover his slip up.

Jiang Shen said, "*Aiyah*, stop moving."

Bai Jinyi could only keep his head tilted back. After a while, he asked, "Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know. It's my first time here. Shanghai is so big."

"Do you want to go take a look at Shen Junyi's studio?"

Jiang Shen did want to go take a look, but was a little shy. "Mr. Shen hasn't asked me to go yet."

Bai Jinyi removed the ice pack. Touching his wound with his thumb, it didn't feel as swollen anymore. "He already went all the way to your house to look for you, why can't you go look for him?"

Jiang Shen discovered that Bai Jinyi really wasn't someone who could be 'reasoned' with…

Lai Song helped collect Bai Jinyi's prize. It was a small, gold belt for the lightweight category. Bai Jinyi didn't really care for it, but Jiang Shen treated it like a treasure.

"You can have it." Bai Jinyi carried his bag, walking ahead.

Jiang Shen was delighted. "Then I'll hang it up on my wall once I go back home."

Bai Jinyi said, "It's so small, what's there to hang? In the future, when I bring home the gold belt from the US league, you can hang that up."

Jiang Shen laughed. "I'll hang them all up! My wall will be full of your belts!"

Next to them, Lai Song could not stand what he was hearing. "What do Richie Rich Bai's belts have to do with you? I've collected so many already, no one is hanging mine up?"

"There is!" As though deathly afraid that he did not know, Jiang Shen reported to him, "The boxing gym in the Children's Center is full of your belts, Lai Song."

Lai Song was at a loss for words.

Although these youths behaved just like adults when boxing or dancing, when it came to playing, they still acted exactly like their age.

Lai Song had a particular love for KFC, and all he thought of every day was fried chicken and soda. Now that he was in Shanghai, he was still the same, but Bai Jinyi did not want to spend this money for him. Lai Song was truly saddened the entire trip.

In his entire life, Jiang Shen had never eaten at the sort of restaurants that had Caucasian servers providing one-on-one service; he'd never even seen one. The plates brought out were extremely huge, yet the portions were tiny. Jiang Shen was afraid of wasting food, so he even ate all the garnishes and sauce, leaving the plates completely clean.

Bai Jinyi looked over at him quite a few times. "You're still hungry?"

Jiang Shen said hurriedly, "I'm full, I'm full."

Bai Jinyi did not say anything, and ordered a ribeye steak.

Lai Song said happily, "Wow, how did you know I hadn't had enough to eat yet?"

Bai Jinyi shot him a look. "I didn't. I ordered it for Little Swan."

Jiang Shen did not know what to say to that.

It was rare that he did not need to practice like usual, and Jiang Shen felt a little unused to it. These last few days, he had stayed in Shanghai with Bai Jinyi, but he still brought along his ballet shoes. Before getting on the train, Lai Song had even teased him, saying that he could not rest for even a day.

The property that the Bai family had purchased in Shanghai was a standalone house with a yard. Before taking a shower, Jiang Shen could not help himself. He changed into his ballet shoes, heading to the yard to practice.

Bai Jinyi came out of the bathroom with a towel on his head, and happened across Jiang Shen doing a front split.

The boy's muscles were supple and prominent, the lines of his shoulders incredibly beautiful. Jiang Shen bent to the ground, then straightened back up. Slowly, he extended his arms, then lifted his head. The curve of his neck was like a flower in full bloom.

Jiang Shen saw Bai Jinyi and gave him a big smile. "You're done showering?"

Bai Jinyi looked away. He covered up by rubbing his hair, before turning back to ask, "You're not tired?"

"I'm used to it. I didn't practice at all this morning to catch the train. If I skip practice tonight as well, I won't be able to fall asleep."

"Why aren't you practicing indoors?"

"The carpet is too thick, I'll slip."

Bai Jinyi mumbled something, but Jiang Shen didn't catch it. He stood up, entered the living room, and gestured at Bai Jinyi to sit down. "I'll apply the ointment for you."

Seeing Jiang Shen wearing the ballet shoes he had bought him, Bai Jinyi was quite happy. He tilted his head up, turning the injured corner of his mouth towards Jiang Shen.

“Does it still hurt?” Jiang Shen’s finger pressed the ointment lightly onto the wound. Perhaps because he had just taken a shower, there were still a few drops of water on Bai Jinyi’s lips. Very naturally, Jiang Shen wiped them away with the tip of his finger.

Bai Jinyi froze.

Jiang Shen asked, “Have you brushed your teeth yet?”

“Yes.”

Jiang Shen laughed again, “No wonder I can smell a strawberry scent.”

After applying the ointment, Jiang Shen wanted it to dry faster, so he leaned in even closer, blowing at it lightly

Bai Jinyi hissed in pain.

Jiang Shen dared not move, asking him cautiously, “It still hurts?”

Pressing his lips together, Bai Jinyi mumbled, “Blow on it a few more times…”

“Oh.” And Jiang Shen really did blow on it a few more times obediently.

Lai Song just happened to come downstairs at that moment, about to shower. When he saw the two, he was shocked. “What are you guys doing?”

Jiang Shen straightened up. “I’m applying ointment for him?”

Lai Song came over. “Are you done?”

Jiang Shen nodded. “Just finished.”

Lai Song reached out, wanting to cup Bai Jinyi’s face. “Perfect timing. Come, *gege* will help you blow on it.”

Bai Jinyi was left speechless.

★

At Bai Jinyi’s place, breakfast would be prepared and presented to the dining table early in the morning. Jiang Shen was the first to wake up. Groggily, he brushed his teeth, and was about to start his practice when he was startled by Auntie Zhu’s appearance.

“Young Master, you’re awake already?” Auntie Zhu smiled as she greeted him. “I’ve prepared steamed egg with soy sauce for you. It’s still warm, come have some to stave off your hunger.”

Jiang Shen was immediately alert from the title 'Young Master'. With a red face, he stammered, “I-I’m not a young master, I’m Jiang Shen…”

Auntie Zhu told him, “You’re the Young Master’s friend, so you're all the same, the same.”

Jiang Shen very much wanted to tell her “it’s not the same, not the same”, but Lai Song had already come downstairs too, and Auntie Zhu had called him 'Young Master Lai' as well. Not feeling troubled at all, Young Master Lai accepted the form of address shamelessly. He even ate Jiang Shen’s steamed egg.

“I’m going to brush my teeth,” Lai Song said, “Little Swan, you woke up so early. Are you going to practice?”

Jiang Shen accepted another steamed egg that Auntie Zhu brought to him. “Uh-huh… You woke up really early as well.”

While brushing his teeth, Lai Song said, “I’m going for a run.” Halfway through brushing, he suddenly yelled towards the second floor. “Richie Rich Bai, even your toothpaste is strawberry flavored. Are you a fucking child?!”

Unlike Jiang Shen and Lai Song, Bai Jinyi liked to sleep in, which was his only bad habit. When he came downstairs with a dark face, Lai Song had already finished his run.

Jiang Shen had just finished practicing as well. Still wearing his ballet shoes, he was gulping milk down with his head tilted back.

Bai Jinyi glanced at him. “You were practicing outside again?”

Jiang Shen swallowed the last mouthful of milk, and replied honestly, “Yes.”

Bai Jinyi frowned. He tended to be quite grumpy when he woke up, and took a seat at the dining table moodily.

Auntie Zhu carried a pot of boiled chicken out. Lai Song had taken a shower, and happened to be hungry already. Helping to divide the meat in the pot, he asked Bai Jinyi, “You’ll be training after breakfast?”

Bai Jinyi said with a bad temper, “I don’t want to train today.”

Lai Song said, “You’re not fully awake yet right? Go take a shower.”

After a bout of silence, Bai Jinyi headed to the bathroom.

Jiang Shen was a little worried. “What’s wrong with Bai Jinyi?”

“He’s just like that. He’ll be fine once he’s awake.” Lai Song selected the largest chicken drumstick and placed it in Jiang Shen’s bowl. “Eat this. You gain what you eat. This is the leg of your brother of the same species.”

Jiang Shen tried to hold himself back but failed. “A chicken is a chicken, and a swan is a swan!”

As expected, Bai Jinyi’s mood improved a lot after a shower, obediently eating his chicken and steamed egg. Jiang Shen poured him a huge glass of milk, and Bai Jinyi drank that as well.

“Today, you have to run five kilometers, skip rope eight hundred times, do twelve sets of stretches, twelve sets with the boxing pad, one hour with the speed ball, and two hours with the sandbag.” Done with his breakfast, Lai Song started looking through the notes on his phone. “You also have to do your anaerobic workouts — rowing, pull ups, and weight lifting, eight sets each.”

Lai Song looked at Bai Jinyi. “Half an hour after eating, let’s do one hundred sit ups first?”

Bai Jinyi pursed his lips. “Once you retire, you should go be a coach.”

Lai Song grinned cheekily. “You know, I’ve gotten invites from boxing gyms.”

Bai Jinyi could not be bothered to respond to his nonsense. He only asked Jiang Shen for his phone, typing down an address and phone number in his notes.

“Shen Junyi should be at his studio today,” Bai Jinyi said, “The chauffeur will drive you there, and when you’re done, he’ll drive you back.”

Jiang Shen was still a little hesitant. “You’re not going to come with me?”

Bai Jinyi raised a brow. “Do you want me to come with you?”

Thinking about how much training Bai Jinyi had to do in a day, Jiang Shen was a little embarrassed to bother him. In the end, he could only say, “I’ll just go by myself.”

Bai Jinyi seemed a little frustrated. Not giving up, he asked again, “You really don’t want me to accompany you?”

Lai Song could not stand him. “Accompany him for what? You’re not little girls holding hands to go to the bathroom together!”

Jiang Shen, who wanted to 'hold hands and go to the bathroom together', was naturally unwilling to be called a girl. In the end, he got into the Bai family’s car alone with his phone. The chauffeur had already been notified ahead of time, and drove Jiang Shen right to the door of the studio.

“I’ll be waiting downstairs for you,” the chauffeur said respectfully, “you can just come down when you’re done.”

Jiang Shen thanked him. He looked up. Shen Junyi’s studio occupied an entire building, and there was even a receptionist at the front desk. Behind her were the words 'Laiyi Dance Studio'.

The receptionist thought he was only here for a consultation and asked, “Your parents didn’t come with you?”

Jiang Shen could only say, “No… I came to look for Mr. Shen.”

The receptionist smiled. “Sorry, you can’t see Director Shen without an appointment. Besides, Director Shen just left to give a lecture today, so we can only show you around the studio.”

Jiang Shen thought for a while, and felt that a tour around the place was not too bad either, so he nodded, finally gaining some confidence. “T-then, I’ll take a look

around.”

Shen Junyi’s studio was a lot bigger than he had even imagined, and Bai Jinyi had also mentioned that this current national 'Number One Ballet Dancer' had his own very experienced dance troupe. Every year, they would have a large performance touring around the world. Attending the ballet had always been a favorite pastime of wealthy people, and for dancers at Shen Junyi’s level, not only did he have a huge group of ballet enthusiasts, they also all had time and money to spare. As such, Shen Junyi was so busy all year long that he didn’t have time to accept students.

Of course, Jiang Shen didn’t think too deeply about it. He followed the receptionist to the dance studio on the third floor. Compared to the Children's Center in the small city, Shen Junyi’s studio was much, much bigger. This was the first time Jiang Shen had seen so many older boys learning to dance. Everyone was dressed in the same dancing attire, and a female teacher was calling out the beats.

“That's Ren Hui, Miss Ren. She is a first-class national ballet dancer,” the receptionist introduced.

Jiang Shen recalled seeing this title on Zhou Luoxiang’s business card as well.

Ren Hui clapped her hands, ending that segment of the dance. She looked out and happened to see Jiang Shen’s face straight on, her eyes immediately settling on him.

Jiang Shen was baffled. He did not know why she was staring at him, and he bowed reflexively . Ren Hui had already pushed the door open, walking out.

“How come you’re here?!” Ren Hui was extremely delighted. She eyed Jiang Shen from head to toe, her voice even rising in pitch. “How did a little hawk like you fly all the way here without a sound? That Shen Junyi didn’t even tell us you were coming!”

Jiang Shen looked completely baffled, and the receptionist looked lost as well. Ren Hui waved, saying heartily, “Quick, give Shen Junyi a call and ask him to come back. Tell him that the little hawk… right, what’s your name?”

Jiang Shen reported his own name.

“*Aiyoh*, my darling Jiang Shen.” Ren Hui cupped the boy’s face as though he was her little baby. “My soul’s about to be extinguished from waiting for you.”

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Obviously, Shen Junyi would not be able to rush back so quickly, so Ren Hui brought Jiang Shen up to the fifth floor, her chatter never stopping. “Would you like some cake?”

Jiang Shen shook his head. “I can’t eat sweet things, I’ll get fat.”

Ren Hui said, “Once in a while is fine.”

She poured Jiang Shen a glass of orange juice, then led him inside the dance studio on the fifth floor. “This will be where you’ll be practising in the future. Shen Junyi

will teach you personally."

Jiang Shen did not know how to react. He had yet to actually decide if he would be coming here to learn, but right now, Ren Hui's words had him feeling a little too embarrassed to back out.

"Shen Junyi doesn't have many students; including you, he only has three in total." Ren Hui turned on the lights in the studio, gesturing at him to take a look around inside. "Your senior will be coming in a while, and she knows about you too."

Jiang Shen dared not step on the floor of the studio with his outdoor shoes, but he did not bring his ballet shoes, so he had no choice but to go barefoot. Ren Hui's gaze fell on his feet, and her smile was both gentle and kind. "Just hold on a moment, I'll get a pair of shoes for you."

Jiang Shen nodded. He stood in the center of the huge studio, looking up at the ceiling, then at the full-length mirror in front of him, and could not help but exhale emotionally.

He studied his reflection for a while and scratched his head shyly. The shirt he was wearing was already more than two years old, and although it could still be considered neat and tidy, the sleeves were starting to fray from too many washes. Fortunately, his pants were a new pair that Bai Jinyi had bought for him, so he did not look too shabby.

He thought about those pretty dance outfits the students were all wearing on the third floor, and could not help but blush. But then, he felt that he was acting too weak, that he was feeling too self-conscious about this, so he reached up and patted his cheeks forcefully a few times.

Ren Hui happened to walk in just then with shoes. "Try them on, I brought quite a few pairs."

"Mn," Jiang Shen said, sitting down to put them on.

Ren Hui's eyes were glued to him the entire time.

Having changed, Jiang Shen realized that Ren Hui was still staring at him, and felt a little shy. "Miss, are you going to watch me dance?"

"Huh?" Ren Hui registered what he said, and responded hurriedly, "You came all the way to Shanghai, it'll be too tiring for you to dance right now. Just do a few stretches, I'll help push your back down."

Jiang Shen blinked, not understanding what exactly Ren Hui was thinking, but still sank down obediently into a side split. He spread his arms, and he grabbed both his feet easily. Then he straightened back up, repeating the movement twice more.

Ren Hui suddenly took her phone out.

Jiang Shen had a questioning look on his face.

"Just continue with what you're doing." Ren Hui turned the camera on, aiming it at him. Sternly, she said, "I'll take a photo for you."

Jiang Shen did not know what to say to that.

Chapter 7 — Dreams Taking Flight

Shen Junyi actually abandoned his lecture halfway, leaving the rest to his manager, Zuo Xingzhi. Poor Zuo Xingzhi belonged to the theoretical school of dance, so he could only communicate verbally with no demonstrations.

“Don’t let that darling student of yours leave too early,” Zuo Xingzhi pleaded with him pitifully, “I’d like to see him too.”

Shen Junyi’s expression was aloof. “Ren Hui will definitely be taking videos. You can watch them when you get back.”

Zuo Xingzhi had nothing to say in response.

Shen Junyi had personally taken a video of *The God of the Earth* that Jiang Shen had performed in the Children's Center Show, and showed it to all the teachers at the studio once he got back.

Ren Hui went crazy on the spot, slapping the table and declaring that she would go to the neighbouring city personally and bring the child back. Shen Junyi stopped her in her tracks. “I went already.”

Ren Hui asked anxiously, “Is he willing to come?!”

Shen Junyi glanced at her. “Zhou Luoxiang had spoken to him as well.”

Choking, Ren Hui said indignantly, “What rights does he have to come snatch people from us?!”

Spinning two jade balls in his hand, Shen Junyi said mildly, “Because he’s Zhou Luoxiang. He won the laurels during last year’s competition in Russia. This year, it’ll be Paris.” He paused, then continued, “The French have invited me to judge, and if everything goes accordingly, this year, he’ll be the ‘Number One Ballet Dancer’.”

Top international ballet competitions were held in various countries every year, but the ones that truly dominated the field were still Russia, France, and Italy. The famous ballet troupes from these three countries were said to be the three pillars of the ballet world, and every year, they would hold a small but immensely prestigious competition. All these dancers had a shortcoming — they found endless joy in their exclusiveness, so naturally, they sneered at all the big, international competitions.

Ballet dancers were just like their pointed toes, standing on the souls of the ordinary.

Actually, Shen Junyi had wanted to speak to Jiang Shen the day he finished his performance, but was caught off guard by Zhou Luoxiang getting there first. After that day, he went to look for him during his dance class, only to discover that they had gone on break.

Shen Junyi had only ever been sought after by others before. When had it ever been reversed?

Mr. Shen, with no experience looking for other people, could only use the stupidest method. During that period, he went and waited at the Children's Center everyday. As the dance studio never opened, he went to ask the person in charge of the Children's Center, only to find that they were also not sure. He hit quite a number of dead ends.

Even so, Shen Junyi was very persistent. No matter the weather, he still continued waiting at the Children's Center.

After seeing him a few times, Bai Jinyi finally found a chance to speak with him. “Who are you looking for?”

Looking at him, Shen Junyi thought that he might as well just try his luck. “I’m looking for a student from the ballet class here.”

“Boy or girl?”

“A boy.”

Bai Jinyi raised an eyebrow. He took his phone out and found a photo, which happened to be the full-face photo taken the first time he had removed Jiang Shen’s makeup. “Is it him?”

Squinting at the screen, Shen Junyi recognized Jiang Shen, and said in astonishment, “You guys know each other?!”

Bai Jinyi did not answer, but asked instead, “Who are you?”

It was a little awkward for Shen Junyi. He was not used to carrying his business cards around, but he was also afraid that if he spoke too professionally, the boy would not understand. After saying his name, he did not know how to continue.

Bai Jinyi did not have too big of a reaction. Looking down at his phone, he searched for a little while, then suddenly looked up at him again. “You’re more impressive than Zhou Luoxiang?”

Only then, did Shen Junyi realize that this boy was probably not an ordinary student. Frowning, he asked, “How did you know?”

Bai Jinyi raised his phone, holding it in front of Shen Junyi’s face. “Your information is on Baidu.”

Shen Junyi did not know how to respond to that.

In the end, Bai Jinyi wrote down Jiang Shen’s address and phone number for Shen Junyi. He glanced at the man, saying abruptly, “He’s a good student.”

Shen Junyi did have the airs of a famous dancer, and he said indifferently, “I’ll only know after I teach him.”

Pursing his lips, Bai Jinyi could not be bothered to expose his efforts over the last few days. He looked down and started playing on his phone again.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shen Junyi saw the photo he had just received. It seemed to be a chicken, but its tail was long and multicolored. He could not help but ask, “What is that?”

Bai Jinyi locked his phone, holding it behind his back, and said rudely, in an icy voice, “Why should I tell you?”

★

“I heard that you have a chicken at home?” Ren Hui helped Jiang Shen stretch out his leg, trying her best to find a topic of conversation. “Shen Junyi said that it even has a big, colorful tail?”

Jiang Shen nodded. “Its name is Tony, and it’s a wild rooster. My neighbor caught it for me.”

Ren Hui said enviously, “The natural environment must be great back at home, right?”

“Of course it’s good in the village.” Jiang Shen rested his chin on the back of his hand, his voice joyful. “We harvest our own crops, raise our own pigs, chickens, ducks, and fish. The fruits are also seasonal, delicious and nutritious.”

Ren Hui smiled. “Then will you feel lonely if you leave home?”

Jiang Shen froze. After a while, he said a little dejectedly, “I will miss them. I’ll miss *Baba* and Mama, I’ll miss Goumao, Qingling-*zi* and Shubao-*ge*, as well as the *Yeye* who owns the bookstore, and Tony.”

He fell silent, lost in his thoughts for a while before looking over and smiling again. “But I still want to learn ballet.”

Ren Hui asked softly, “Why?”

“Because I like it.” Jiang Shen swayed his legs. His smile was very bright, like a soft, little fledgling.

“Compared to raising chickens, farming in the village, and playing with my friends; compared to all of that, I like ballet even more.”

When Shen Junyi returned, he did not show how harried he was. Following him was a girl of seventeen or eighteen. She was very tall and willowy, a full one and a half heads taller than Jiang Shen.

“Her name is Jing Luoyun,” Shen Junyi introduced, “your *shijie*.”

Jiang Shen did not know he had been tricked. He had yet to become Shen Junyi’s student, yet he still greeted Jing Luoyun as his senior obediently.

Smiling, Jing Luoyun greeted him gently, “Shenshen-*shidi*.”

Shen Junyi then said, “You have a *shixiong* as well, around your age. His name is Liu Xingzhi, but he’s not here today. You’ll be able to meet him next time.”

Jiang Shen felt that all his seniors had really nice sounding names…

Standing to the side, Jing Luoyun snuck a few glances at him. When Jiang Shen looked back, she averted her eyes again shyly. Finally, seeming to muster up her courage, she called out to him again, “Shenshen-*shidi*.”

“Yes?” Jiang Shen responded happily.

Jing Luoyun gave a small smile again. Her appearance was not slim and girly at all, and she was even taller than the boys dancing on the third floor. Plus, she had short hair, and her features were androgynous, both elegant and handsome.

"Don't be so shy." Shen Junyi gestured at Jing Luoyun to stand next to Jiang Shen. "Demonstrate a few moves and let Jiang Shen learn from you."

Pressing her hands to her cheeks, Jing Luoyun nodded shyly at Jiang Shen before standing in front of the mirror.

Jiang Shen watched her carefully.

Jing Luoyun closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened her eyes again, her expression changed.

Although they were only doing a few basic grand pliés and jetés, Jing Luoyun's style was completely different from Jiang Shen's. Her steps were light and relaxed, her jumps high and quick, and her limbs were like the flowing clouds when extended. As for Jiang Shen, he was flexible yet powerful, and when he jumped, he was like an arrow leaving the bow, the curve of the muscles on his back and waist very beautiful.

After watching them for a while, Shen Junyi clapped his hands together, signalling for them to stop.

"Luoyun," he said suddenly, "do a lift."

Jiang Shen did not understand what that meant, while Jing Luoyun suddenly turned to look at him, smiling bashfully. With her soft voice, she said, "Pardon me, Shenshen-*shidi*."

Jiang Shen was confused.

Jing Luoyun reached out, holding his waist, and with a little strength, Jiang Shen was lifted into the air.

Jiang Shen was completely stunned.

Jing Luoyun looked up at him, her smile shy and gentle. "Relax. You're very light; you won't fall."

★

Just as Jing Luoyun said, despite being a girl, she was very steady as she lifted him. Jiang Shen did not know how she became so strong. After finding his balance, he dared not shift around until Jing Luoyun spun in a circle and put him back down gently.

Shen Junyi watched them finish the move and commented, "Your balance isn't adequate, you haven't been practicing it enough everyday."

Jiang Shen did not really understand what he meant by balance, only to hear Shen Junyi continue explaining, "Go home and draw a circle about one meter in diameter. In the circle, do a demi plie with only one leg. Alternate legs, and as

you're doing so, the other leg has to be extended straight in front, toes pointed." He got Jing Luoyun to demonstrate once. "Complete eight sets, each set with twelve plies."

Jiang Shen hurriedly used his phone to note it all down. He was not very familiar with the keyboard on his phone, and typed rather slowly.

Shen Junyi waited for him to finish, then asked suddenly, "Did you bring your school fees?"

Jiang Shen did not expect him to suddenly mention any fees, and he felt both awkward and embarrassed. "No… I-I only came to take a look…"

Frowning, Shen Junyi said mildly, "You can owe today's class for now. Next time you come, it will be included in the total."

Jiang Shen did not know what to say.

The matter of tuition was settled just like that, and Jiang Shen barely understood what had just happened. When he got into the Bai family's car, he was still worried about the money. Filled with guilt, he called home, but Jiang Luoshan told him not to think too much about it.

"Do you like it?" His father asked simply.

Jiang Shen thought for a while. "I do."

Jiang Luoshan laughed. "As long as you like it. Tell Mr. Shen that we'll prepare a year's tuition by next week."

"Mn," said Jiang Shen. Feeling tears welling up within him, he rubbed his tingling nose, sniffling slightly.

Unable to hold his laughter back, Jiang Luoshan commented, "Foolish child." After a few moments, he continued quietly, "This is an occasion worthy of celebration. Your mother and I are going to set off firecrackers for you at home."

After completing his rowing drills, Bai Jinyi felt like he was a pile of dead flesh. Taking a gulp of the chicken and vegetable smoothie that Lai Song handed over, his expression looked like he had just eaten shit.

"Finish it." Lai Song had no sympathy at all. "It's full of nutrients, protein, and fibre; it's perfect."

Bai Jinyi politely declined to agree.

Workers came down from upstairs, and the one in charge reported to Bai Jinyi, "The floor has been laid down. After waxing it, we polished it again. You'll be able to use it tonight."

Bai Jinyi nodded, signalling to Auntie Zhu to pay the work crew.

Lai Song did not understand. "Didn't you just set up your boxing room on the top floor recently? Why are you renovating again?"

“I split it in half to create a dance studio for Little Swan.”

Lai Song was speechless.

Bai Jinyi explained lightly, “There are a lot of stones and pebbles in the yard, it’s not suitable for him to practice there.”

Lai Song agreed with him, but still felt very strange about it. Thinking over it for some time, he finally said, “Even if he decides to come to Shanghai to learn ballet, he might not be staying here with you. Shen Junyi’s school is so big, he should have a dormitory, right?

Bai Jinyi paused, then asked, feigning dumb, “Is that so?”

“Of course!”

Raising a brow, Bai Jinyi said, as though it was obvious, “Then just don’t tell him about it.”

Lai Song was dumbstruck.

It was already quite late when the chauffeur dropped Jiang Shen off. Bai Jinyi stood outside the yard just to wait for him. When the boy got out of the car, he was immediately delighted upon seeing the boxer. “Why are you out here?”

“I was waiting for you to eat dinner together.”

Jiang Shen followed him into the yard. “Was training tiring today?”

“It’s fine, I’m used to it already.”

Standing by the foyer, Lai Song was already chewing on a chicken drumstick. Seeing the two boys, he yelled, “Hurry up and come in, why are you guys dawdling outside?!”

Jiang Shen washed his hands and sat down at the table. Auntie Zhu addressed him as 'Young Master' again, preparing his cutlery for him and ladling food onto his plate.

Lai Song shredded a chicken breast and asked him, “So how was the studio?”

Mr. Shen’s school is so big!” Jiang Shen spread his arms out, drawing a huge circle. “There are so many boys learning ballet there, and I even gained a *shijie*.”

“*Shijie*?” Bai Jinyi asked. “What kind of *shijie*?”

Jiang Shen answered, “Jing Luoyun-*shijie*. Mr. Shen said that she had just been accepted into a dance college this year, and she’s extremely impressive.”

Lai Song asked, “Does she dance as well as you?”

Jiang Shen sighed. “I’m still quite far from her level.”

“You’re young, there’s no hurry,” Lai Song said, “So you’ve decided to learn from Shen Junyi?”

“Mn.” Jiang Shen nodded. He thought for a moment, then said earnestly, “I’ve already agreed to pay the school fees today, a person’s gotta be trustworthy.”

Lai Song looked puzzled. He did not understand the logic, wondering if this had to do with learning from Shen Junyi, or not wanting to part with his money.

Bai Jinyi, on the other hand, seemed to be in quite a good mood. He did not say much, removing the meat from the chicken wing and placing it in Jiang Shen’s bowl. “Did you dance there today?”

Jiang Shen originally wanted to tell them about how Jing Luoyun had lifted him today, but when the words were on the tip of his tongue, he saw Bai Jinyi’s face and changed his mind. “Mn… I did a few basic moves with *Shijie*.”

Bai Jinyi stared at him for a little while, asking placidly, “That’s it?”

Nodding firmly, Jiang Shen said with a straight face, “That’s it!”

Bai Jinyi plucked the chicken carcass clean slowly, then tossed the bones back into the pot and instructed Auntie Zhu, “Take that away and make some stock.”

Lai Song shuddered inexplicably. “… Why do I feel a trace of pity looking at the chicken?”

Having trained a huge amount during the day, Richie Rich Bai did not need to train any more in the evening. Jiang Shen, however, was used to practicing at night. He was about to head to the yard when he was stopped by Bai Jinyi.

“Don’t train in the yard, it’s dangerous.” Bai Jinyi gestured at him to follow him up the stairs.

Jiang Shen asked curiously, “Isn’t your boxing room on the top floor?”

Pushing the door open, Bai Jinyi stepped aside. “Now, it’s not just mine.”

Jiang Shen poked his head in, exclaiming in surprise. Although the room was not big, it was still at least thirty square meters or so. Full-length mirrors and railings had been installed on all four walls. The floor was new and not slippery at all. Jiang Shen changed into his ballet shoes, stroking the floor gently with his feet for some time. With his legs crossed, he sat in the middle of the room, so happy that his dimples even appeared.

“You’ll practice here from now on.” Bai Jinyi sat down next to him, tilting his head. “I’ll be boxing next door.”

Jiang Shen really felt that Bai Jinyi was too wonderful. So wonderful, he did not know how to thank him. As a result, he could only say, “Is there anything you want?”

Bai Jinyi asked deliberately, “You’ll give me anything?”

Jiang Shen was troubled. “If it’s too expensive, I can’t afford it for now… but I can save up and buy it for you in the future.”

Unable to hold back his laughter, the corners of Bai Jinyi’s mouth lifted, his face splitting into a huge grin, revealing his teeth. He bowed his head, his hands curling into fists as he coughed, trying to hide it.

“Last time, you said you were going to dance *Swan Lake* for me,” said Bai Jinyi, “have you practiced it yet?”

“It’s so difficult…” Jiang Shen sighed, “I can’t do the full dance yet, but I’ll definitely be able to in the future.”

Bai Jinyi said, “Then just perform it for me once you’ve finished learning it.”

Jiang Shen’s eyes widened. “You only want to see me dance? You don’t want anything else?”

“What else do you want me to want?” Bai Jinyi asked back in return.

Jiang Shen considered it seriously, “I’ll give you a set of boxing gloves!”

Bai Jinyi laughed. He reached out with a finger, flicking Jiang Shen’s forehead. “You can’t tell the person about the gift you’re giving them. That’s not romantic at all.”

Pressing his hand against his forehead, Jiang Shen was a little indignant. “Then why did you tell me what gift you wanted?”

“You don’t understand.” Bai Jinyi rested his head in his hand, his elbow on his knee. He looked at Jiang Shen, suddenly smiling. “Dancing for me *is* romantic.”

★

Despite having been lectured for being unromantic, Jiang Shen still used all the red packet money he had received for Lunar New Year and bought Bai Jinyi a pair of new boxing gloves.

Bai Jinyi did not say much, but he used them for training the very next day. Lai Song could be considered a freebie attached to Bai Jinyi, and received a wrist guard that Little Swan had bought for him.

Having decided on his ballet school and teacher, Jiang Shen now had to go home and prepare, and change his residential address. Bai Jinyi remained in Shanghai, continuing his daily training that was worse than death, while Lai Song finally showed some mercy, no longer torturing him with the blender. He headed back with Jiang Shen.

“I’ll be in my third year of high school already, so I have to prepare as well,” said Lai Song, “I have a whole bunch of classes I need to make up for.”

Jiang Shen said, “Song Xin is also attending make-up classes. Will you get to see her?”

“Before, I was able to see Xinxin-*mei* everyday.” Lai Song had his arms crossed as he waited for Jiang Shen’s bus with him. “She’s extremely happy to find out that you’ve decided to learn from Shen Junyi. Later on, we’ll come visit you and hang out together.”

Hearing that they wanted to come visit him, Jiang Shen was naturally very happy, and his words burst out of him. “The hydrangea fields have all bloomed! Song Xin would definitely like that!”

★

Goumao had brought Qingling-*zi* with him to wait for Jiang Shen at the bus stop. The girl wore a soft, yellow dress, holding a parasol. When she saw Jiang Shen, she stood on her toes excitedly, waving. "Shen-*zi*!"

Jiang Shen squeezed his way out of the crowd. He had no time to wipe the sweat dripping down his face, and upon seeing the siblings, he immediately began rummaging through his bag. "Qingling-*zi*, look what I bought you!"

Goumao pushed him. "We can talk about that when we're home. Do you want ice cream?"

Jiang Shen and Qingling-*zi* each held a saltwater popsicle, eating it as they walked back to the village. The bookstore by the bus stop had its doors wide open, and to cool the place, a bamboo curtain had been put up. The old man, wearing a tank top, was lying in a recliner behind the curtain, fanning himself with a thin fan.

"*Yeye*!" Jiang Shen stuck his head through the curtain, shouting, "I'm back!"

The old man only squeezed one eye open, groping about, then put on his reading glasses that were next to his hand. "Where did you go have fun?"

"Shanghai." Jiang Shen took out a backscratcher from his bag. "This is for you, *yeye*."

The old man exclaimed in delight.

Jiang Shen said, "I'm about to go to Shanghai to learn ballet!"

The old man's face split in a grin. "Good, good." Tremulously, he stood up, and said, "Wait a bit."

Jiang Shen waited outside.

Scratching his back with the backscratcher, the old man rummaged around inside. When he came back out, he had a box in his hands. "I took photos of you dancing that day, they've finally been developed."

In this day and age, phones could take photos and videos. If that was not enough, there were also instant Polaroid cameras. Most people also stored photos in their computers, and very few would choose to develop them specially.

"I've made an album for you." The old man was a little proud, and instructed, "Look at it when you get home."

The intense summer heat of August could be seen in the melting saltwater popsicle in Jiang Shen's hand. Walking along the green fields, he saw Shen Shubao riding his new mountain bike towards them from afar.

Qingling-*zi*'s dress was golden like a sunflower. Goumao crouched down, carrying his sister on his back.

On the other side of the road was a shallow bank, once again bustling with life. The boatman was steering his oar, making his way through layers and layers of reed marshes. Behind the boat was a gaggle of wild ducks, leaving glittering ripples in their wake.

Shen Shubao was waiting at the edge of the field. With one foot on his bike and the other on the ground, he yelled, “Walk faster!”

Goumao laughed. “Can’t you see that I have a princess on my back?!”

The 'princess' kicked her legs, wanting to come down, so Goumao set her down carefully. Shen Shubao took Jiang Shen’s bag from him, discovering how heavy it was. “What sort of treasures did you bring back? Didn’t we tell you not to spend too much?”

Jiang Shen said, “It’s nothing, just a few small trinkets.”

Goumao exposed him. “You and I both got keychains, and Qingling-*zi* got a pencil case. This kid spent all his red packet money, he’s bound to get a beating when he gets home.”

Shen Shubao was extremely amused. “Let’s eat dinner together tonight. With us around, your parents shouldn’t be able to beat you.”

Tan Lingling and Jiang Luoshan had started preparing this meal very early in the morning. Their neighbors Miao Hua’er and Li Zhuo both came to help. Chen Laoshi had bought firecrackers, and when he came back, he smacked his forehead. “*Aiyah*, I forgot to get some wine.”

Miao Hua’er scolded him. “Do you have a pig’s brain or something? What *can* you remember?”

Chen Laoshi chuckled sheepishly. “I’ll go buy it now, I’ll go buy it now.”

Li Zhuo walked out, undoing her apron as she smiled. “There’s no need to make another trip, I’ll get Shen Guoliang to bring some when he comes home from work.”

The dairy farm where Shen Guoliang worked was not very far, and on the way back from work, he picked up two bottles of yellow rice wine. Unlike the other fathers, Shen Guoliang was the least chatty one. Upon entering the house, he put the bottles down, and seeing that there really wasn’t anything he could help with, he stayed a little while, then left, as though he couldn’t stay still.

From a distance away, Tan Lingling saw him and exclaimed, “Where is Liang-*ge* going?”

Li Zhuo was not worried in the slightest. “Don’t worry about him, he must have gone to pick the children up.”

Shen Shubao cycled slowly at the very front. Along the way, boats were selling lotus pods. He called out to a boatman, then turned back and asked, “How many do you guys want?”

Qingling-*zi* spread her fingers out. “Five!”

Shen Shubao got off his bike, and slid down the bank to pay the boatman. When he climbed back up with the lotus pods, he saw Shen Guoliang standing by the bank.

"*Ba*!" Shen Shubao was surprised. "Why are you here?"

"I came to fetch all of you." He took the lotus pods from his son's hands, crouching down. "Come, Qingling-*zi*, Uncle will piggyback you."

As the only girl, being pampered by all these families was as natural as daylight. While carrying the girl, Shen Guoliang peeled the lotus pods, stuffing the seeds into each of the three boys' hands.

When they were approaching the village entrance, Jiang Luoshan and Chen Laoshi were already waiting there.

The bright red firecrackers stretched all the way to Jiang Shen's yard. When Chen Laoshi lit the fuse, Qingling-*zi* covered her ears on reflex. Red confetti fluttered and danced, landing on Jiang Shen's head, and the proud rooster, Tony, stood alone on the highest point of the yard gate, crowing vigorously.

The adults gathered around the children, and they entered the house like it was the holidays. Jiang Shen was seated right in the center, and Miao Hua'er and Li Zhuo each gave him a red packet.

Tan Lingling was a little embarrassed. "The two of you, really, why are you being so courteous?"

Miao Hua'er laughed cheerily. "Shen-*zi* has accomplished such great things, of course he has to be rewarded!"

Tan Lingling said, "The most accomplished one is Shubao. He's been accepted into a top high school. That's a joyous thing for the entire village."

Li Zhuo waved her hand. "Don't praise him anymore. If you continue, he's really going to float up to the sky."

Jiang Luoshan opened a bottle of wine, filling Shen Guoliang and Chen Laoshi's cups. The men did not speak much, just emptying their cups in one gulp after clinking them. Tan Lingling perfunctorily reminded them not to drink too much, before going to the kitchen to heat up the food.

Li Zhuo placed some food in the children's bowls, and urged Jiang Shen to eat the chicken drumstick.

Miao Hua'er advised her, "Just go ahead and eat, don't worry about the children. Maoxiu and Shubao can take care of them."

Chen Maoxiu was still peeling the lotus pods for his sister, and Shen Shubao had piled half the chicken into Jiang Shen's bowl.

"Oh right, the keychains." Jiang Shen suddenly remembered, and ran to his room to bring the presents out.

For his two older brothers, he bought keychains with swans printed on them. One was white, and the other was black. He let them choose which one they wanted.

Goumao picked the black swan, as he said disdainfully, "Don't you have any taste? If I carry this, won't it look too girly?"

Shen Shubao kicked him from under the table. His hands were fast, and his keys were already hanging from the keychain.

Jiang Shen was immensely delighted, and presented a swan pencil case to Qingling-*zi*. “It took me so long to decide on these. You guys have to use them, alright?”

“I will, I will!” Despite his judgmental words, Goumao also attached his keys to his keychain immediately. “What else do you want to eat? I’ll get it for you!”

Qingling-*zi* put her pencil case away like a treasure, then smacked her brother. “You haven’t even finished peeling the lotus pods yet!”

The meal lasted late into the night, and the stove alone was relit three times. In the end, only the three men, their faces flushed with wine, were left at the table. The mothers had moved to the yard, enjoying the breeze as they munched on melon seeds while chatting. Tony was on guard next to them, occasionally pecking at the shells that fell to the ground.

Shen Shubao and the others were watching the male version of *Swan Lake* in Jiang Shen’s room with him. The computer was borrowed from Chen Maoxiu’s family. Other than Qingling-*zi*, who was snuggled in Goumao’s arms and sleeping soundly, the three boys were very engrossed in the performance.

“How many times have we watched this already?” Chen Maoxiu asked Jiang Shen quietly as they watched.

Jiang Shen thought about it. “I can’t remember anymore, probably ten times?”

Shen Shubao sighed emotionally, “It’s still so good.”

Staring at the screen, Jiang Shen did not speak. Right now, they had reached the scene where the prince appeared by the lake. The male swan, played by Adam Cooper, was dancing next to the prince. The musculature on the bare, Caucasian body seemed even more clearly defined and powerful. Every movement of the male swan was accompanied by subtle shifts of his muscles.

The more Jiang Shen watched, the more troubled he became. He murmured to himself, “It’s so difficult…”

“What’s difficult?” Shen Shubao asked. “Do you want to dance this?”

Jiang Shen was a little too embarrassed to say that he was going to dance it for Bai Jinyi, so he could only mumble an acknowledgement.

Shen Shubao laughed. “Then you have to choose a male dance partner.” He watched for a little while more, then continued, “But it’s really quite difficult, especially when it comes to the acting. This is a love story, right? Between two men.”

Jiang Shen was shocked. His mind had never even wandered in that direction, so he asked, “A man liking another man?!”

“What else could it be?” Shen Shubao’s tone was relaxed, and made it sound like it was nothing extraordinary. “A male swan, a male prince, there’s nothing wrong with it.”

Chen Maoxiu didn't even make it through half of the performance before he had to carry Qingling-*zi* home to bed. Shen Shubao continued watching with Jiang Shen for a little while longer before leaving as well. Finally, Jiang Shen was the only one left, and he finished the entire ballet by himself.

Shutting down the computer, he gave a long sigh. There were many thoughts in his head, and he felt a little confused and lost.

The yard had long since grown quiet. The adults had already dispersed. Moonlight shone into the room, and everything could be seen clearly without having to turn on a light.

Jiang Shen sat down on the edge of his bed. Unfastening his bag, he realized he had yet to open the box the old man from the bookstore had given him.

Thinking for a moment, he wiped his hands clean, and opened the lid carefully.

Inside, was a thick photo album.

Jiang Shen flipped through the pages one by one. Every photo was of him dancing: leaping, spinning, kicking his skirt up high, as well as the images that were on his body that day, hot as flames. Flipping to the end, he saw a folded note tucked there.

The old man's handwriting was bold yet gentle.

He wrote, 'I hope that in your life, your dreams will glow ever so brightly, and that you will grow wildly, unhindered, and unwavering.'

★

In the last few days of August, Lai Song kept his word, and came to the village with Song Xin.

City folks always stood out a little in villages. Furthermore, Song Xin was a dancer. As she walked through the rural fields, it looked as though she was dancing. She wore a long, white chiffon dress, the edges hemmed with lace. Carrying a parasol, her long hair was tied in a ponytail, and she looked both youthful and pretty.

Lai Song stood next to her like a little mountain. When he saw Jiang Shen, he yelled, "Little Swan!"

From far away, Jiang Shen responded, "Hey!"

Goumao and Shubao were currently digging for crawfish and river snails in the mud. Their bare legs were smeared with dark sludge, and the upper half of their bodies were not much cleaner. Splashes of muddy water and sweat covered their heads and faces.

Not bothered at all, Lai Song greeted them, "Hi, nice to see you guys again."

Goumao and Shubao both recognized him. After all, that day, Lai Song was sitting next to Richie Rich Bai, 'who owned a mine'. Plus, looking like that, it was hard to forget him.

“What are you guys doing?” Lai Song asked, crouching down.

In Goumao’s hand was a long fishing net, and he glanced at Song Xin standing nearby. “We’re catching crawfish. You guys came to see Shen-*zi*?”

Lai Song grinned. “We came to play.”

Shen Shubao climbed out of the mud, and washed his hands and feet in the clean canal next to them. He asked, “What do you wanna do?”

Lai Song studied their surroundings, and suddenly asked, “Where’s Qingling-*zi*?”

Goumao looked at him warily. “Why are you looking for my sister?”

Lai Song said casually, “We might as well all hang out together. Xinxin-*mei* is the only girl here, she’s going to be bored.”

Jiang Shen was chatting with Song Xin to the side, and the girl was clearly very interested in the crawfish. “Are we eating them tonight?”

Jiang Shen nodded. “Yup. Join us for dinner.”

Song Xin seemed eager to give it a try. “Can I go down and catch them too?”

Jiang Shen looked at her skirt, troubled. “Your clothes aren’t too convenient for that… Also, the sun is too strong, you’ll get tanned.”

Song Xin pouted. “I already put on sunscreen.” Leaning closer to Jiang Shen, she asked, “Have you noticed anything?”

Jiang Shen studied her carefully. “Why is your mouth so red?”

“That’s lipstick.” Song Xin looked at him, displeased. “Does it look nice?”

Jiang Shen nodded. “It does.”

Song Xin looked at the mud again, unwilling to give up. “I really can’t go down?”

Hesitating for some time, Jiang Shen finally sighed. “I’ll go and see if anyone can lend you a pair of pants…”

Song Xin cheered happily, pumping her fists up to the sky. Hearing the noise, Lai Song looked over at them and raised a brow. “Xinxin-*mei*, what tricks do you have up your sleeve this time?”

A little afraid of him, Song Xin said timidly, “No-nothing…”

But Jiang Shen replied honestly, “Song Xin wants to catch crawfish. Shubao-*ge*, do you have a pair of pants you can lend her?”

“…” It took Shen Shubao a while to react. He looked at Song Xin’s appearance and outfit, then pointed at himself. “Me?!”

Goumao looked confused. He stared at Song Xin, speaking earnestly from the bottom of his heart, “Dear Fairy, it’ll be wronging you to let you go down into the mud. Let’s go pick flowers instead.”

Song Xin was wordless.

Jiang Shen had mentioned the blooming hydrangeas behind the forest before. At first, Lai Song did not pay much attention, thinking it would just be like the flower patches found in rich neighbourhoods in the city. However, when he reached the spot, he discovered that he had a very deep misunderstanding of 'a few flower patches'.

That forest was at least three to four thousand square meters, and the hydrangeas bloomed from the top of the hill all the way down to the bottom. It was basically a huge flower wall; a view that would be very popular on Instagram.

Song Xin looked at the flowers with her mouth agape, unable to speak for some time.

"Be careful when you walk," Goumao reminded her, "it's hard to find the path among the flowers, and the stalks will most likely catch on your skirt."

Shen Shubao said, "How about we wait for Qingling-*zi* to take you? She plays here often, and is very familiar with how to get in and out."

Song Xin could not help but ask, "Are you guys not coming?"

Jiang Shen rolled up his pant legs and sleeves. "We'll be picking flowers for you guys!"

This was the first time Qingling-*zi* was hanging out with a girl a few years older than her. When she saw Song Xin, she was a little reserved, and greeted her politely and respectfully, "*Jiejie*."

Song Xin smiled. "Hello, Qingling-*zi*." She had always grown up amongst girls, and she much preferred hanging out with girls than boys.

As expected, not long after, the girls got along so well, they were inseparable. Hand in hand, they took photos amidst the flowers and shared secrets. Lai Song looked at them, a little baffled. "What are they doing?"

Goumao was quite used to it, and he continued to pick flowers diligently. "Girls are all like that. Once they get to know each other, they're like long lost sisters from a past life!"

Lai Song was speechless.

Song Xin suddenly came running from far away, shouting excitedly at Lai Song, "Come take photos of Qingling-*zi* and I together with the hydrangeas in the background please!"

Lai Song could only stand up to take her phone. In the end, despite taking photos for a very long time, the two girls were still unsatisfied.

"No, our legs are too short here!"

"My expression wasn't ready yet."

"You have to make it look a bit more natural, this one looks obviously posed."

Lai Song could not take it anymore. “You guys *are* posing in the first place! How natural can it be?!”

Qingling-*zi* went and dragged Shen Shubao over. “Shubao-*ge*, you do it!”

Lai Song wanted nothing more than to hand this difficult chore over to Shen Shubao, and go help Jiang Shen pick flowers. Goumao had a large bouquet in his hand already, and he shoved it into Jiang Shen’s arms. “Hold it. You can give it to your fairy-*jiejie* later.”

Carrying a large bouquet of hydrangeas, Jiang Shen sat down by the side obediently, watching the girls take photos. Lai Song turned to look back at him a few times, before suddenly pulling out his phone and secretly capturing a shot of Jiang Shen’s side profile.

Bai Jinyi had just completed twelve sets of his rowing drills at the gym. He was lying on the bench, and next to him sat the interpreter and his coach. The two rattled away, one after another, and Bai Jinyi listened as he nodded along perfunctorily. Beside him, his phone chimed with a notification for a new message.

Garbage Disposal Lai: “[Image]”

Bai Jinyi unlocked his phone. Swiping it open, his forehead crinkled slowly.

The image Lai Song sent was of Jiang Shen carrying the flowers. Just one look, and it was obvious that the photo had been taken secretly. The lighting and angle were both bad, and the boy in the photo had his head bowed, the pink and purple hydrangeas obstructing most of his face.

Bai Jinyi looked at the photo quietly for a while, then saved it to his phone.

“Just one?” Bai Jinyi replied.

“There are others.”

“Send them all over.”

Lai Song did not think much about it. He sent many photos of Goumao, Shen Shubao, Qingling-*zi*, and Song Xin, including his own selfies.

Bai Jinyi was speechless.

Lai Song said, not fearing death, “Don’t the photos look good? The village is so much fun. Are you very, very jealous right now?”

Jiang Shen gave Song Xin all the flowers they had picked. The girl could not even hold them all in her arms, her grin spreading wide across her face. But Song Xin was very persistent about going into the mud to catch crawfish, and seeing that Jiang Shen was not helping her, she asked Qingling-*zi* for help instead.

Jiang Shen really could not understand how the fairy-like Song Xin was so down to earth that she had to roll around in the mud before she was comfortable.

Qingling-*zi* lent Song Xin the pants Goumao normally wore for farming. The older girl did not mind, and she even asked Shen Shubao to take a photo of her after changing into them.

Worried for her safety, Lai Song didn't care whether or not his pants would get dirty. He just pulled his pant legs up, took off his shoes, and waded in as well.

Remembering Shen Junyi's words that a dancer's feet were their life, Jiang Shen sat obediently by the field, guarding his friends' shoes.

Just as he was bored with nothing to do, Bai Jinyi texted him. "What are you doing?"

Jiang Shen typed the words slowly, one by one. "Lai Song and Song Xin came to play, and everyone is catching crawfish now."

"You finished picking flowers?"

"Yup!" It wasn't until after sending the text, that Jiang Shen felt something was wrong. How did Bai Jinyi know that he was picking flowers today…

Bai Jinyi's replies came very quickly. "Take a photo and show me."

Jiang Shen held his phone up and opened the camera. He took a photo somewhat unskillfully, then sent it to Bai Jinyi.

Opening the photo, Bai Jinyi only saw a group of crazy, mud-stained people chasing after each other in the mud. It was unclear what they were doing, their figures were all blurred from running.

Bai Jinyi was speechless.

After some time, Bai Jinyi only responded with four words. "You didn't join them?"

Jiang Shen was just about to tell him that because of ballet, he was afraid of injuring his legs, so could not go in.

At that moment, Bai Jinyi sent another reply. "I looked for you in the picture for so long; it's not them that I want to see."

Bai Jinyi sent his third successive text, as though urging Jiang Shen. "Quick, take a selfie and send it to me."

Jiang Shen did not know how to respond to that.

★

When Bai Jinyi received Jiang Shen's selfie, Song Xin was already done with her mud pond debut. The result was six pounds of thirteen-spice crawfish.

The adults ate indoors while the children peeled the crawfish out in the yard. When Song Xin had arrived earlier, she had been an exquisite fairy, dressed in a long, white, chiffon skirt while carrying a parasol. But now, her hair was in a disarray and her makeup had been washed off. Wearing Goumao's pants, she had one foot in her shoe while the other one was bare and resting on her stool as she licked her fingers after removing the head of a crawfish.

Lai Song no longer wanted to say anything, only handing her a napkin to wipe her hands.

Goumao and Shubao had clearly adjusted quickly to the fact that even fairies liked to roll in the mud and eat with their foot on their stool. Other than Goumao occasionally wondering whether he would still be able to get his pants back, the children had built a deep friendship based on eating mud together. Their 'love' was truly as deep as the sea, and even more valuable than gold.

Summer nights in the village were still very breezy and cool even without air conditioning. The sky seemed to be draped with a black curtain covered in stars, and the flower-scented summer wind blew against the girls' hair and faces.

With her hands supporting her on the stool, Song Xin looked up at the sky and suddenly suggested, "Let's dance."

Jiang Shen was a little surprised, but nevertheless, he still asked her, "What do you want to dance?"

Song Xin thought for a moment. "Let's do *Picking Lotuses*!"

Jiang Shen did not say anything. He got out a bamboo mat from inside, spreading it out in the yard. Song Xin did a few warmups, and stepped onto the mat barefoot.

Shubao asked curiously, "Do you want music?"

Song Xin smiled. "There's no need for that, Lai Song can sing."

Lai Song shot her a look, but did not say anything. With folded arms, he sat down next to the mat.

Jiang Shen and Song Xin stood together and bowed rather properly to everyone there.

Lai Song coughed lightly, and sang the first note.

The song *Fish Playing Amongst Lotus Leaves* was only available online in a version sung by children. Lai Song's voice had long since changed, carrying with it a tinge of masculine maturity. As he sang, "one can pick lotuses in Jiangnan, where the lotus leaves are lush and beautiful," his voice lacked the gentleness Jiangnan was famed for, but there seemed to be a tenderness and weightiness that reminded one of mountains instead.

Song Xin's limbs were so supple, she seemed just like a fish. Evoking the image of mountains and water, Lai Song's voice was surprisingly compatible.

She danced, bending down to play with the water, lotuses growing at her feet, and when she leapt up, it was just like the lyrics — the 'fish' were playing everywhere.

"Clouds cover the distant mountain, and the mountain path is windy." Lai Song closed his eyes. His singing climbed higher gradually, and there was the heart of a

child, rich with youth within his notes.

Cupping her face, Qingling-*zi*'s eyes were glued to Song Xin. Inexplicably, her eyes turned red.

Goumao glanced at his sister, then lifted her into his lap, hugging her.

Song Xin let go of her last pose slowly as Lai Song sang the last line, "around Jiangnan". She had broken out in a bit of a sweat, but looked extremely joyful. Jiang Shen held her hand, spinning her around, and they curtsied.

Shen Shubao was finally able to react. Standing up, he led the applause. Like a gentleman, Lai Song bowed slightly. He held his hand out with his palm up, and Song Xin laughed as she placed her hand in his, spinning around again. She pretended to lift the hem of a skirt, curtsying once more.

Goumao seemed to feel that it wasn't enough to just clap. He suddenly cupped his hands around his mouth, and howled into the air a couple of times, scaring the already sleeping Tony. The rooster flew out of its nest and chased him around the yard, pecking at him in a bad temper.

With a huge smile across her face, Song Xin hugged Qingling-*zi* and wiped the tear tracks from her face gently.

Jiang Shen took his phone out and saw that Bai Jinyi had just sent a text.

"I really, really like dancing." Jiang Shen finished typing with his head bowed, not caring how the content of the message came out of nowhere. He watched as Song Xin, sprawled across Lai Song's shoulders, whined cutely at the boy to sing another song.

Harassed to the point where he had no other choice, Lai Song could only open his mouth and continue his performance.

Laughing, Jiang Shen felt as though his heart was swelling up, like something was about to spill over. His phone vibrated in his hand. This time, Bai Jinyi had sent a voice message.

The displeasure in the boy's voice was evident as he said stiffly, "Then why aren't you hurrying back yet?"

Rather innocently, Jiang Shen asked him, "Is it because you miss me?"

For once, Bai Jinyi didn't respond instantly. From the screen, Jiang Shen could see him typing continuously.

"Either way, I miss you." Jiang Shen did not suspect anything, and told him frankly, "Today, I was thinking about you when we were eating crawfish. It would have been great if you were here… Do you want to eat crawfish? I'll bring some to you tomorrow."

Bai Jinyi's focus was clearly off. "Tomorrow?"

He thought about it, then emphasized, "I want to eat crawfish."

Lai Song and Song Xin stayed only a couple of days before they had to return to the city. Having packed his bags and prepared his school fees, Jiang Shen also planned on leaving with them.

First, they sent Song Xin home safely, then Lai Song accompanied Jiang Shen to the train station. He bought the boy a ticket, reminding him, “Be careful of your money on the way.”

Patting his backpack, Jiang Shen said, “My mother sewed it into the innermost pocket already.”

Lai Song laughed, then said abruptly, “Song Xin asked me to pass along this message: learn ballet well. If you slack off, she’s going to come to Shanghai and beat you.”

Shocked for a moment, Jiang Shen looked at Lai Song, nodding seriously. “Alright.”

“She also said she will go to the Children's Center regularly to dance, as exercise.”

Jiang Shen was unable to stop himself, and his face split into a grin.

“As for me.” Lai Song straightened up, a rare stern expression on his face. “You tell Bai Jinyi, I’ll fight my last match in the third year of high school and win my gold belt back before retiring.”

Proudly, he raised an eyebrow and winked at Jiang Shen. “I will be on the top of the national boxing championship, waiting for him to climb up.”

Bai Jinyi waited outside the train station, carrying his gym bag on his shoulder. Despite his standoffish expression, there were still quite a lot of people around staring fixedly at him.

When he saw Jiang Shen walk out from the station, Richie Rich Bai’s thick, dark brows finally shifted a little obligingly.

Jiang Shen saw him from a distance away.

“Bai Jinyi!” He ran out from the crowd.

Reflexively, Bai Jinyi took a few steps forward.

Other than his luggage, Jiang Shen also carried a sack of crawfish. Excitedly, he said, “Look what I brought you!”

The sack was too close, and a crawfish’s pincer nearly clamped down on Bai Jinyi’s nose.

Jiang Shen was not done yet. “I even stayed up late to make you this.”

He pulled out a huge bouquet of dried hydrangeas, shoving it into Bai Jinyi’s arms. “Isn’t it pretty?”

This was the first time in Bai Jinyi's life that he had been given flowers out in public. Jiang Shen did not seem to think there was anything inappropriate about it, and even praised, "The flowers suit you, you're both pretty!"

Bai Jinyi was speechless.

In the end, the chauffeur was the one who helped carry the flowers and crawfish. Before getting into the car, Jiang Shen asked, "Why did you come and pick me up?"

Bai Jinyi looked at him. "You're carrying so much cash, you want to go by yourself?"

"I've sewn the money into my bag already, I won't lose it."

Bai Jinyi had no choice but to say, "You should go and hand that in tomorrow."

Jiang Shen also felt that the earlier he paid the fees, the more at ease he would be. He was a little excited, and turned back to look at Bai Jinyi again, feeling as though it had been a long time since he last saw him. Leaning in close, he asked, "Did you grow taller?"

Bai Jinyi said somewhat pompously, "You just noticed?"

Jiang Shen laughed. "I grew taller too."

"What about your weight?"

"It shouldn't have changed. I can't put on any weight, so tonight, you'll have to eat all the crawfish."

Right now, each time Bai Jinyi heard the word 'crawfish', he felt his head ache. But as he was the one who deceived Little Swan into coming back so early by saying he wanted to eat crawfish, he could only cry and eat them all by himself.

"I wonder where Mr. Shen will arrange for my dorm to be." Jiang Shen recalled suddenly. He was quite looking forward to it and said, looking at Bai Jinyi, "I'll have a *shixiong* called Liu Xingzhi, I wonder if I'll be staying with him."

Bai Jinyi frowned. He reached out, pinching Jiang Shen's face and shaking it vigorously. "Who did you say you were going to live with?"

Jiang Shen's face did not hurt, but his pronunciation was somewhat affected. "Shit… shit *xiong*?"

Bai Jinyi said expressionlessly, "That's right, your *shixiong* is a pile of shit."

Jiang Shen was absolutely bewildered.

★

The annual tuition for Shen Junyi's ballet classes was around 80,000RMB, and that included the cost of food, clothes, lodging, daily necessities, as well as school fees for their academic classes. Laiyi Dance Studio had their own student dormitory, but Jiang Shen wasn't planning on staying there.

"I'll be staying with Bai Jinyi." Naturally, Jiang Shen would not hide anything from his respected teacher. With his bag on his shoulder, he followed behind Shen Junyi

to collect his dance clothes.

Shen Junyi turned back, glancing at him. “That boxing friend of yours?”

Jiang Shen was surprised. “*Shifu*, you know him?”

Shen Junyi did not answer that question. He picked up a new, fitted top and handed it to Jiang Shen.

The boy’s dance clothes had been made a while ago. There was a set for every season, and just like Shen Junyi’s, they were all white. There were also two styles for each season: a loose-fitting one and a tight-fitting one. The quality was excellent, and they were subtly embroidered with clouds.

“Will there be any inconveniences staying with someone else?” Shen Junyi asked him.

Jiang Shen shook his head. “Nope, Bai Jinyi is very good to me.”

Seeing that he had already made up his mind, Shen Junyi did not say any more. “Then we’ll refund you the dormitory fee of 1000RMB every month. Look for Manager Zuo at the end of every month to collect it.”

After changing, Shen Junyi led Jiang Shen up to the dance studio on the fifth floor. Jing Luoyun was already there. Dressed in red, she was currently doing the splits, bending down to the floor. When she saw Jiang Shen, she once again smiled bashfully as she greeted him in a quiet voice, “Shenshen-*shidi*.”

Jiang Shen had missed her a lot. “*Shijie*, I’m back.”

Jing Luoyun bit her lip, her cheeks a little red. “W-welcome back.”

Shen Junyi’s gaze swept around the studio, asking, “Where’s Xingzhi?”

Jing Luoyun was still quite shy when facing her teacher of ten years. Softly, she said, “Xingzhi-*shidi* said that he’s going to see Mr. Pu, so he’ll come a little later.”

Frowning, Shen Junyi said lightly, “I’ve told him many times before to not get too close to a fan. Didn’t you try to stop him?”

Jing Luoyun’s expression showed that that wasn’t something easily accomplished, but she couldn’t say anything in rebuttal. Sighing, Shen Junyi waved her off. “Lead Jiang Shen and do warmups and stretches, we’ll wait for Xingzhi to start the class.”

Jiang Shen didn’t really understand what ‘ballet fans’ were. As Jing Luoyun helped press him down to the floor, she explained patiently, “Although Liu Xingzhi is only a few years older than you, he has already performed with the dance troupe.”

“Performed?” This was the first time Jiang Shen had heard of this, so it was all very new to him. “Can I perform in the future as well?”

Jing Luoyun said genially, “Of course! You have to participate in competitions too. Xingzhi-*shidi* has already been awarded the silver prize quite a number of times in Russia and France. He’s currently one of the youngest, most outstanding male ballet dancers.”

“Wow,” Jiang Shen breathed. He truly felt that these labels were weighty and far from him. Whether it was Shen Junyi, Zhou Luoxiang, Liu Xingzhi, or Jing Luoyun, their achievements seemed unattainable, and he revered them sincerely.

“You’re still young.” Jing Luoyun seemed to be able to tell that Jiang Shen felt a little lacking. Smiling, she consoled him, “At your age, Liu Xingzhi was also—”

“When I was 13, I was already the winner of the National Ballet Competition.” Someone interrupted Jing Luoyun boorishly before she could finish.

Jiang Shen looked up reflexively, only to see a person leaning lazily against the door.

Jing Luoyun felt a little awkward, but she still called out first, “Xingzhi-*shidi.”*

Liu Xingzhi ignored her, and walked inside. He looked down at Jiang Shen, his smile a little mocking. “You’re the new one?”

Unlike the facial features of eastern Asians, Liu Xingzhi had a tall, straight nose and deep-set eyes, like a person of mixed-race descent. His skin was a healthy, golden tan, his limbs long and slender, and his shoulders straight and broad. Of course, the most eye-catching thing was the youth’s headful of lush dreadlocks, scattered messily across his shoulders.

Jiang Shen stood up, greeting somewhat timidly, “*Shixiong*.”

Jing Luoyun seemed to be afraid of Liu Xingzhi bullying him, and said hurriedly, “*Shifu*’s looking for you. He had already told you not to get too close with Mr. Pu, but you just won’t listen.”

Liu Xingzhi’s eyes shifted away from Jiang Shen’s face, and he pursed his lips sharply. “He came to look for me, and was so damn annoying. So what if I paid him a bit of attention?” As he spoke, he held a hair tie in his mouth. He tied up his dreadlocks, then walked out the door. He continued loudly, “I’m going to look for *Shifu*!”

Jing Luoyun sighed in resignation at the departing figure of her junior, then turned to look at Jiang Shen, becoming embarrassed again. “Your *shixiong*… his temper’s just like that…”

All Jiang Shen could think of was Liu Xingzhi’s unconventional hairstyle. He asked secretively, “Is he a foreigner?”

“Liu Xingzhi?” Jing Luoyun smiled as she shook her head. “No, he’s from Inner Mongolia.”

Liu Xingzhi finished changing. In contrast to Jiang Shen, his clothes were pure black. Shen Junyi led him into the studio, then pointed at Jiang Shen. “From now on, Jiang Shen is your *shidi*.”

Liu Xingzhi glanced at him, his gaze a little disapproving and hostile as he said perfunctorily, “Got it.”

Jiang Shen hesitated for a bit, but still greeted him, “*Shixiong*.”

Liu Xingzhi’s response was a snort.

Jing Luoyun did not know how to react.

Shen Junyi's reaction time was clearly not just a little slow. With no warmth to his expression, he was a little baffled. "You guys fought?"

Liu Xingzhi answered impatiently, "No."

Surprisingly, Shen Junyi actually believed him, and said sternly, with great earnestness, "It's good that you're not arguing. Xingzhi, you have to take good care of Jiang Shen."

Due to their different levels of skill, Liu Xingzhi and Jing Luoyun had already started to practice for official performances. As for Jiang Shen, Shen Junyi trained him one-on-one, starting all over again from his foundations.

"Every dancer has their own habits and style." Shen Junyi sat cross-legged on the floor, facing Jiang Shen. "You have to know clearly, why you dance."

Jiang Shen nodded, not fully understanding.

Shen Junyi was a little stern. "You haven't figured it out yet, why are you nodding?"

Jiang Shen could only reply, "But I like dancing."

"How long can liking something last?" Shen Junyi said mildly. "Your 'like' is not worth anything, do you understand?"

Jiang Shen could not say he understood, nor could he say he didn't. He was so caught in this dilemma, he felt rather upset, but he still could not come up with an answer.

The basics he had learnt at the Children's Center were clearly not up to Shen Junyi's standards. He gestured at Jiang Shen to hold onto the bar, then started to correct him, from the positions of his arms to the way he lifted his legs. Putting everything else aside, Jiang Shen was very familiar with enduring pain and hardship. In just one class, he actually managed to correct most of his positions to Shen Junyi's standards. While doing so, Jiang Shen did not complain even once, despite how the back of his top became soaked with sweat.

Quite a number of times, Jing Luoyun could not help but look back at them while practicing up front. As he wiped his sweat, Liu Xingzhi shot her a look, saying icily, "Can you pay a bit more attention?"

Although Jing Luoyun was quite shy, she was very disapproving of Liu Xingzhi's attitude. "What's wrong with you? Did you get bullied when you were with Mr. Pu?"

Liu Xingzhi let his dreadlocks down, covering his head with his towel. "Who would dare bully me?"

Jing Luoyun did not understand. "Then why are you in such a temper?"

Liu Xingzhi snorted. "Are you really that dense? Do you like being a good person that much?"

Jing Luoyun was baffled.

Liu Xingzhi looked over at Jiang Shen, who was currently doing a port de bras. His face was covered under his towel, and his gaze was both complicated and clouded. “Competition admissions, the principal position in performances; now that he’s here, you still don’t know what that means?”

Falling silent, Jing Luoyun did not respond.

Liu Xingzhi huffed, upset with how she wasn’t actively trying to achieve more for herself. He stood up, retying his dreadlocks, then twisted his arm to one side and said coldly, “In any case, I won’t give up any of that to him.”

It was only near dinnertime, when Jiang Shen finally clambered into the Bai family’s car.

Bai Jinyi was sitting in the back. Looking at Jiang Shen’s state, he raised his brow unconsciously. “What happened?”

Jiang Shen sounded like he was on his last breath, “I was practicing…”

Bai Jinyi gestured at him to lie down flat. Lifting one of Jiang Shen’s legs, he placed it on his own and started to massage it. “Once we get home, go soak in a hot bath for a while.” Richie Rich Bai was a boxer, so his hands were skilled and precise. After kneading Jiang Shen’s muscles for a little while, Bai Jinyi saw the boy starting to nod off.

“Did you see that *shixiong* of yours?” Bai Jinyi asked.

Jiang Shen tried his best to open his eyes that were falling shut. Reminded about it, he sighed, troubled.

Bai Jinyi asked, “Did you tell Shen Junyi you’re not staying at the dorms?”

Jiang Shen murmured, “I did… but even if I didn’t, I probably wouldn’t be able to stay there anyway…”

“What happened?”

“My *shixiong*…” Jiang Shen tilted his head to the side, thinking about it, then said, “He seems to hate me alot.”

Bai Jinyi didn’t think Jiang Shen was the sort to offend anyone easily. “Why?”

Jiang Shen yawned. He really was too sleepy. “I don’t know… Maybe it’s because I kept staring at his hair?”

Bai Jinyi was speechless. What sort of stupid reason was that?

Jiang Shen’s eyelids grew heavier and heavier. In the end, when they finally fell shut, he still seemed to be struggling with finding the right adjectives. He mumbled, as though he was sleep talking, “His head… looks just like a big centipede…”

About the Author

Jing Shui Bian / □□□

Once known as Geng/Mugeng Mugeng□□/□□□□□

Good with writing affectionate and moving emotions.

Works relate closely to life;

Describing the various tenderness and beauty in life;

Weaving countless encounters of romance and happiness in youth.

Other books by Jing Shui Bian:

Silent Hearts

Times of Our Lives

Salad Days